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4 GOINGS ON

7 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Amy Davidson Sorkin on litigating the ballot; crunching skirt numbers; the history of comedy; a Nimoy's première; dead time.

LETTER FROM GAZA
Mosab Abu Toha 12 Unsafe Passage
A family flees their homeland.

ANNALS OF ETIQUETTE
Zach Helfand 18 Tipping Points
The evolution of the gratuity.

SHOUTS & MURMURS
Colin Nissan 23 Nature, Wow

PROFILES
Patrick Radden Keefe 24 The Ventriloquist
A script doctor's journey to his own voice.

THE CONTROL OF NATURE
Jonathan Franzen 34 The Cats of L.A.
The No Kill movement's unwanted consequences.

FICTION
Rivka Galchen 44 "Crown Heights North"

THE CRITICS

BOOKS
Jennifer Wilson 49 *Can opening up a marriage save it?*
51 Briefly Noted
Adam Gopnik 53 *Camille Pissarro's profundities.*

A CRITIC AT LARGE
Manvir Singh 58 *How the Mongol hordes made the world.*

THE THEATRE
Helen Shaw 62 *"Appropriate."*

THE CURRENT CINEMA
Anthony Lane 64 *"Ferrari," "The Crime Is Mine."*

POEMS
Madeleine Cravens 40 "Leaving"
Paul Muldoon 46 "Federico García Lorca, Coney Island, 1929"

COVER
Bianca Bagnarelli "Deadline"

DRAWINGS *Liza Donnelly, Barbara Smaller, Edward Steed, Jon Adams, Mick Stevens, Asher Perlman, Amy Hwang, Liana Finck, Frank Cotham, William Haefeli, Sarah Kempa, Paul Noth, Brendan Loper* SPOTS *Tamara Shopsin*

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Paul Muldoon (*Poem, p. 46*) published "Howdie-Skelp" in 2021. His poem "Federico García Lorca, Coney Island, 1929" will appear in the exhibition catalogue for "The Lorca Archive."

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

2023 IN REVIEW

Cal Newport writes about why knowledge workers are exhausted—and need a fresh start.

PERSONAL HISTORY

David Owen sets out to investigate what he once stood to inherit through a complicated family legacy.

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LEFT: LIAM EISENBERG; RIGHT: COURTESY DAVID OWEN

THE MAIL

BEYOND *SUFFERING*

I was deeply impressed by Casey Cep's portrait of the poet Christian Wiman ("Close to the Bone," December 11th). I find Wiman's reckoning with spiritual themes to be honest and moving. I was surprised, however, by Cep's account of a line in one of Wiman's poems, which she reads as claiming that "there is no solution to the problem of suffering." The Buddha found such a solution more than two thousand years ago, and distilled it in his Four Noble Truths, which are the basic tenets of the Buddhist tradition. Although not everyone partakes in Buddhism's teachings, its ideas are a counterpoint to Cep's sweeping statement.

Tom Moseley
Boston, Mass.

AMERICAN LAMENTS

John Adams, in his review of "Time's Echo," Jeremy Eichler's book about how music can memorialize atrocities, remarks, in reference to past instances of national mourning, "Americans seem to have a popular song for just about every emotion, but in the immediate aftermath of tragedy only classical music seemed able to fill the void" (Books, December 11th). This is not always true. We do have popular songs that respond powerfully to tragedy, such as Jimi Hendrix's "Machine Gun," which is a lament that reflects on the rioting that tormented American cities in the sixties, and on the obscenities that were ongoing in Vietnam at the same time.

The live recording of "Machine Gun" which was made during a performance on New Year's Eve, 1969, is a terrifying musical evocation of the horrors of war. The song begins with a few verses, and then moves into a guitar solo, in which Hendrix launches his listener into a sonic hell-world. Combining improvisation with feedback and using a limited set of signal-processing devices, Hendrix evokes a cacophony of explosions, screams, demonic howls, and what sounds like radioactive wind wafting across a battlefield. The solo is not just memorable—it is indelible.

Paul Cabarga
Seattle, Wash.

Adams's brief mention of American music brought to mind John Coltrane's "Alabama" and Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam." The former is both a dirge and a monument for the victims of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. The latter is a monument to the civil-rights movement, and a masterpiece of resistance. Both are among the most affecting reckonings with national traumas that American musicians have ever made.

Alan Grostephan
Decatur, Ga.

IN THE HIVE

In Henri Cole's "Autumn Fern," the speaker compares their body to that of a drone bee, which, by "spreading nectar across the comb," works to "hasten the creation of viscous honey" (Poems, December 11th). In reality, drone honeybees do nothing but eat and wait to mate with a queen. Worker bees, who are all female, do the hard work of foraging for pollen and nectar, feeding larvae, building comb, and guarding the hive. Until the second or third week of their lives, worker bees take care of the internal duties of the hive. After that, they forage, visiting blooms until, a few weeks later, their wings give out and they die. By contrast, drones await their chance to mate in relative luxury, until autumn, when they are tossed out of the hive—appropriately so, since, without them, the colony has a better chance of surviving the winter on the food stores that the females have amassed.

Arthur L. Ranney
Platteville, Wis.

•

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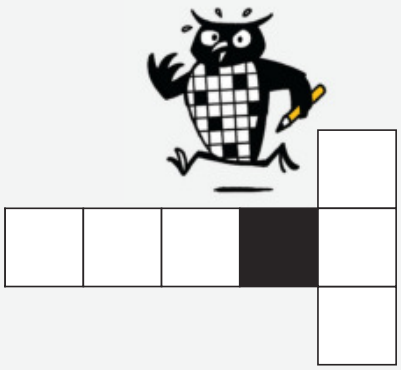

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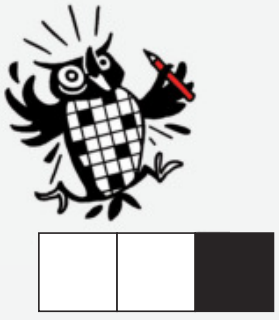

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GOINGS ON

DECEMBER 27, 2023 – JANUARY 9, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing.

The theatre sector wobbled for a moment when it seemed that the vital **Under the Radar** festival—a showcase for experimental work and international scene-shakers—might be cancelled after it lost its home at the Public Theatre. Happily, that one home has now become a dozen: in January, venues such as Abrons Arts Center, Japan Society, and La Mama band together as a wide network, where the weird show(s) can go on. Thank heavens, because nowhere else do we get such a concentrated burst of formal transgression, including the fearless Nile Harris production "this house is not a home" (pictured below), a furious, dance-filled eulogy for Harris's friend Trevor Bazile and a goad to a hipster scene that flirts with both fadism and fascism.—*Helen Shaw (Various venues; Jan. 5–21.)*

MARIA BARANOVA

ABOUT TOWN

PODCASTS | "I think there's something fundamental to our human nature where we really enjoy messing with our own senses," Tamar Avishai says in her sage and buoyant art-history series, **"The Lonely Palette,"** a member of the excellent Hub & Spoke audio collective. "We love it when something becomes something else entirely, like that image of a vase morphing into two profiles." She's introducing Grant Wood's "American Gothic," that enduring font of deceptive mystery—but she could also be describing the pleasures of her own podcast, which since 2016 has invited listeners to contemplate visual art through audio and imagination alone. Rothko, Caravaggio, Ono, "Dogs Playing Poker": each episode focusses on a single work, guided by Avishai's attentive mind and ear, and by the reflections of critics, curators, and art lovers, and enhanced by exquisite sound design. The effect is both soothing and invigorating, like a sunny morning at a great museum.—*Sarah Larson*

OFF BROADWAY | **"Buena Vista Social Club"**—a new musical, directed by Saheem Ali, with a book by Marco Ramirez and music by the eponymous musical collective—draws its fun, its exuberance, and its occasional moments of emotional depth from its focus on how voices come together to change societies. In Havana, Cuba, the young Juan de Marcos (Luis Vega) asks the legendary singer Omara Portuondo (Natalie Venetia Belcon) to record with the band he's assembled, to give Cuban music its due. The show splits into two strands: in the present, there's the recording project; in Omara's youth there's trouble, and musical and political ferment. The show is an amazing time, but precise politics are never openly discussed—a flaw in a show whose premise is that music is politically consequential.—*Vinson Cunningham (Reviewed in our issue of 12/25/23.) (Atlantic Theatre Company; through Jan. 21.)*

DANCE | Flashy production values have become increasingly central to flamenco shows; **Noche Flamenca** is remarkable for keeping things simple. In "Searching for Goya," two singers, two guitarists, and four dancers share the stage. The absent partner, invoked in words and movement, is the Spanish painter Francisco Goya, whose work evoked the darker, more violent corners of the imagination. The mood is shadowy, the palette a turbulent chiaroscuro. Each of the evening's interlinked dances is loosely inspired by images from Goya's nightmarish works, including the hooded figures of "Los Ensacados" and the desperate combatants of "Duelo a Garrotazos."—*Marina Harss (Second Floor Theatre at 122CC; Dec. 27–Jan. 16.)*

OPERA | Georges Bizet's **"Carmen,"** with its intensely seductive chromaticism, is often framed as the story of Don José, a small-town man, naïve and a little softheaded, who is driven mad with desire for Carmen, an impossibly alluring woman. Don José blames Carmen for his need to murder her, and the British director Carrie Cracknell seizes upon that hideous logic of gender-based violence in her new production for the Metropolitan Opera. Cracknell says she sees in Don José "a character who lacks a central sense of self," a man whose isolation from the various communities he tries to join destabilizes him and makes him dangerous. Aigul Akhmetshina and Piotr Beczała star, respectively, as Carmen and Don José; Daniele Rustioni conducts.—*Oussama Zahr (Metropolitan Opera House; select dates Dec. 31–Jan. 27.)*

INDIE POP | The singer and guitarist Greta Kline has performed under many names since her early Bandcamp days, in the twenty-tens, but she has been defined by her music as **Frankie Cosmos.** With her 2016 album, "Next Thing," Kline announced herself as indie pop's most stunning miniaturist, presenting detailed, scaled-down scenes from her life as pithy songs. In recent years, Frankie Cosmos has transformed into a full-on band. The group's last two albums—"Close It Quietly" (2019) and "Inner World Peace" (2022)—have brought a richness to Kline's bedroom pop without compromising the beloved compactness that has become a Frankie Cosmos signature.—*Sheldon Pearce (Baby's All Right; Dec. 29.)*

MOVIES | The New York-based filmmaker Juleen Compton's first feature, **"Stranded,"** from 1965—which she wrote, directed, produced, and starred in—should have launched her career behind the camera and in front of it. Instead, it languished in obscurity and has only belatedly been rediscovered. Its freewheeling, New Wave-like style was in step with the times, but its subject and tone were far ahead. Compton plays Raina, a young American woman who travels through Greece and aboard a barge with her straitlaced American boyfriend (Gary Collins) and a gay French artist (Gian Pietro Calasso). Raina dances and sings, and swims naked by night, living and loving freely and challenging viewers with her defiant stare into the camera, even while expressing doubts, in sharp-edged philosophical dialogue, that she never gives in to.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on the Criterion Channel starting Jan. 1.)*

TABLES FOR TWO

Bar Miller
620 E. 6th St.

Bar Miller, a three-month-old omakase counter in the East Village, is the creation of Jeff Miller, the chef and co-owner of the pioneering sustainable-sushi destination Rosella. The new eight-seat restaurant—in a very tiny, gorgeously designed room—is a spinoff of Rosella's omakase program. If you want to spend two hundred and fifty dollars on sushi, there are plenty of options in New York, all trying to out-boast one another about the quality and the rarity of ingredients flown in from the other side of the world. What draws you to Bar Miller is, most likely, its recusal from that gas-guzzling competition: as at Rosella, Miller prioritizes local fish and ingredients and avoids overfished species. The shrimp is from South Carolina; the mackerel is from Virginia.

Bar Miller's fifteen-ish courses roughly followed a traditional omakase playbook: small introductory dishes, including a brilliant sunchoke-and-geoduck riff on clam chowder, leading to a main event of meticulously constructed, rapid-fire nigiri and a sweet finish—silky corn ice cream topped with a delicate portion of Sturgeon caviar. But Bar Miller seems unsure how to position itself: is it a luxurious take on virtue, or a virtuous take on luxury? This uncertainty, alas, lands the restaurant in a space that's not enough of either. There's little storytelling about provenance. Though the nigiri fish was superlative—a cut of gently soy-cured bluefish dusted with crispy sunflower-seed powder was one of the most inspired bites I've had in a long time—the rice was dry and a little bland. This disappointment might have been mitigated by a bit more fanfare over the fact that it had been grown in the Hudson Valley.

Similarly, any sushi connoisseur knows that bluefin tuna, the headliner of most omakase meals, is the great guilty pleasure of the sea, brutally overfished at the cost of tremendous collateral damage to oceanic life. At Bar Miller, I counted four dishes starring bluefin, including a tartare atop an ingenious "tostada" made from scraps of the evening's fish, dehydrated and held together with yucca starch. Surely such an indulgent ingredient is at odds with the restaurant's commitment to sustainability? A diner asked, and the chef, James Dumapit, a Rosella veteran, explained that the fish was Western Atlantic bluefin, caught off the coast of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and not the overfished Pacific species—though I wondered if there was more to it. I would guess that the fish was line-caught, which significantly minimizes ecosystem disruption, and that the preponderance of tuna dishes was a way to insure that no part of the costly animal went to waste. When the premise of your restaurant is that you've got a unique story to tell, it seems like a missed opportunity not to focus more energy on the telling. *(Omakase $250.)*

—Helen Rosner

PICK THREE

January is full of experimental-theatre festivals; here are Helen Shaw's picks.

1. The new-opera smorgasbord **Prototype** has many tasty-looking offerings, including an opera, by Huang Ruo, about Chinese immigrants ("Angel Island") and a song cycle by the Dutch artist Wende ("The Promise"), co-composed by Isobel Waller-Bridge. If I could see only one thing, though, it would be **"Terce: A Practical Breviary,"** by Heather Christian. Her contemporary gloss on a medieval mass follows in the quasi-sacred footsteps of her exhilarating 2022 masterwork, "Oratorio for Living Things."

2. Some of the shows in the far-flung **Under the Radar** festival are returning New York successes, such as "Public Obscenities" and "Pushkin 'Eugene Onegin' in Our Own Words"; others are international visitors, including "Hamlet/Toilet," a Dadaist frolic from the Japanese provocateur Yu Murai. But the rare show that's both new and local is my top pick: **"Open Mic Night,"** by Peter Mills Weiss and Julia Mounsey, a duo so committed to the cutting edge of the avant-garde that they (or their collaborators) sometimes bleed.

3. Every year gets better at the fringe-forward **Exponential Festival,** which inhabits various venues in Brooklyn. Big experimental folks such as Banana Bag & Bodice and Marissa Joyce Stamps are on the docket, but I'm particularly jazzed for **"Two Sisters Find a Box of Lesbian Erotica in the Woods,"** by the gonzo playmakers Emma Horwitz and Bailey Williams. Williams wrote "I thought I would die but I didn't," an electrifying 2019 meditation on everyday horror; I'm ready to be shocked all over again.

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
OFF THE BALLOT

"We travel in uncharted territory," the Colorado Supreme Court observed on Tuesday, as it ruled that Donald Trump's name cannot appear on that state's Republican Presidential-primary ballot. Indeed, the court's 4–3 majority found that Trump had taken part in an insurrection on January 6, 2021, and that Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment thus disqualifies him from serving as President or in "any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any State." This would suggest that Trump—and many others involved with January 6th—is not even eligible for a job running his local post-office branch, or as the property appraiser for Palm Beach County, Florida, where he lives.

On a personal level, Trump probably shouldn't be trusted to put a stamp on an envelope. In recent weeks, he has talked about being a bit of a dictator and accused migrants of "poisoning the blood of our country." But, on a legal level, as the dissenting justices in Colorado recognized, the question of trust is not just about him. The case, Norma Anderson et al. v. Jena Griswold—Anderson is a Republican voter and Griswold is Colorado's secretary of state—raises fundamental questions for our democracy about whom we trust to effectively bar people from taking part in governing the country. Serious jurists have good-faith doubts about whether Trump is eligible to be on the ballot; others, just as serious, find this use of Section 3 profoundly unsettling. Similar cases are pending in more than a dozen states. The Colorado majority, noting "the magnitude and weight of the questions now before us," stayed the decision until at least January 4th, before the state's ballots are due to be finalized, in order to give Trump a chance to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Some of the risks that the Colorado justices allude to are obvious: Ronna McDaniel, the chair of the Republican National Committee, said that Trump's disqualification is "election interference"; Trump posted, on Truth Social, "BANANA REPUBLIC???" Of course, they would make the same complaints even if there were a commonly recognized and accepted process for adjudicating Section 3 disqualifications. Unfortunately, there is not. And the Colorado decision opens the way not just for more whining about witch hunts but for unprecedented confusion about whether and where Trump is on the ballot. In short, the majority found that Colorado, or any state, could write its own rules for implementing Section 3. In a strongly worded dissent, Justice Carlos Samour, Jr., called this "an imprudent, unconstitutional, and standardless system."

The analysis of Section 3 is not necessarily determined by partisan alliance. All seven Colorado justices were appointed by Democrats. But it is not too dramatic to say that if the Supreme Court were to adopt the reasoning of the Colorado majority wholesale, with no serious adjustment, it could lead to an unravelling of the electoral system. Some Republican-controlled states might even try to use Section 3 to disqualify Joe Biden: Texas's lieutenant governor said that the Colorado ruling made him wonder about taking Biden off that state's ballot for allowing millions of people to cross the border. And what role might individuals in the Electoral College play? Section 3's broad, undefined terms should give anyone pause. For example, the provision mentions not only insurrection and rebellion against the Constitution of the United States but giving "aid or comfort to the enemies thereof" as a basis for disqualification—at a time in this country when there is talk of enemies everywhere.

When the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified, in 1868, Section 3 was directed at Confederates who had previously taken an oath of office. It has barely been invoked since. What Samour, in his dissent, refers to as "the wellspring of Section Three jurisprudence" is an 1869 ruling by Salmon P. Chase known as

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

Griffin's Case. It will be much discussed in the weeks to come. Samour's summary of Griffin's Case is that, even if "we are convinced that a candidate committed horrible acts," there still needs to be adequate due process before disqualification—and that only Congress can pass a law to define that process. The closest approximation now on the books, he writes, is "arguably" a federal criminal statute regarding insurrection known as Section 2383. But, while Trump is fighting dozens of criminal counts in four different cases, charges under that law are not among them.

All three dissenters contend that there is a hopeless mismatch between Section 3 and the state election statute that was applied by Colorado's lower court in the case. The statute allows for an expedited schedule and limited due process, which makes sense for addressing straightforward eligibility questions such as a candidate's age or citizenship or residency. But the judge had to decide whether Trump was an insurrectionist (her answer was yes) and whether "President" counted as an office of the United States under Section 3 (she said no—a convoluted constitutional judgment that not even the dissenters saw a need to endorse). Samour calls the lower-court trial "a procedural Frankenstein." He asks, "How can we expect Coloradans to embrace this outcome as fair?"

The U.S. Supreme Court's conservative super-majority might be expected, one way or another, to keep Trump on the ballot. But on what ground and with what consequences for future candidates? It is also possible, given the complicated textual and due-process issues involved, that one or more Justices—conservative or liberal—might take a surprising stand. A year ago, the Court might have found a way to punt; now, with the election so near, there is, as Harvard Law's Laurence Tribe has said, "no easy exit ramp." The Court has already agreed to hear a separate appeal about an obstruction statute that is part of the case that Jack Smith, the special counsel, is bringing against Trump in Washington, D.C.; Smith has also asked it to consider a potentially momentous dispute over Presidential immunity.

There are far sounder tools for addressing Trump's attempts to overturn the 2020 election. One is beating him at the polls. Another is impeachment, which allows for disqualification upon conviction. But, after the House impeached Trump (for the second time) for his role in January 6th, Mitch McConnell, who was then the Senate Majority Leader, rallied Republicans to acquit the outgoing President in his Senate trial. McConnell now has much to answer for. Perhaps he thought that Trump would just go away. Instead, a constitutional crisis has arrived.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

PARIS POSTCARD

DESIGNER DATA

Fashion is an emphatically subjective industry. "Pink is the navy blue of India" (Diana Vreeland). "There is a famine of beauty, honey" (André Leon Talley). "Sweatpants are a sign of defeat" (Karl Lagerfeld). "An evening dress that reveals a woman's ankles while walking is the most disgusting thing I have ever seen" (Valentino). A whim or a feeling can seal the fate of a cerulean sweater, a smoky eye, or a mutton sleeve.

Yet, just as sabermetrics transformed baseball, data is coming for fashion, supplementing the hemline index—the theory that skirt lengths rise and fall with the stock market—with data lakes, traffic-share analyses, and lots of graphs. The other day, Alexandra Van Houtte, the Bill James of the catwalk, was sitting in a conference room in the Ninth Arrondissement of Paris. Her company, Tagwalk, is known as "Google for fashion." But, instead of typing "weird rash" or "post office hours" into its free search engine, you can search every runway look by season, city, designer, color, model, and trend. "People are always scared of data, but data is inspiring to creativity," Van Houtte said.

Van Houtte—in Chloé sneakers, soft black pants, and a long black coat embroidered with frangipani and chrysanthemums—founded the company in 2016. At the time, she was assisting a stylist, who was preparing for a shoot with Angelina Jolie and needed to see black dresses: every single one on the market. Van Houtte got to work, clicking through slide shows, screenshotting looks, compiling them into PDFs, and compressing the documents, then waking up the next day and doing it all over again. "It was massive torture," she recalled. Now a buyer or a designer or an editor can enter "black dress" into Tagwalk and, within seconds, find seventeen thousand four hundred and ninety-seven of them, from a 2019 fish-net number by Dolce & Gabbana to a one-shouldered mini from Balenciaga's recent show in L.A.

Tagwalk's business model relies on two sources of revenue: smaller brands can pay to have their images appear on the site, while big brands buy trend reports that tell them who's looking at what where. "I don't care who's cool, and it's not my place to care," Van Houtte said. The day's order of business was to finalize a book—the first volume in a series—of takeaways from the Spring/Summer 2024 collections, which had concluded in Paris just a few days earlier. Van Houtte and a trio of analysts gathered around a table and opened their laptops.

"You have these other trend reports that are, like, 'Orange is the color. We think leopard's going to be a really big thing,'" Van Houtte said. "There's this thing where data's becoming cool, so sometimes people are just throwing numbers everywhere, like, 'Data, but make it fashion!'" She pulled up an Instagram post, which claimed that a certain brand had enjoyed "140% more press" during Paris Fashion Week. "Compared to what? Compared to when?" Van Houtte said. "I really do not know how this was calculated."

A draft of the book appeared on a wall-mounted screen. "O.K., let's go!" she said.

A slide ranking the "20 Hottest Brands" according to Tagwalk users' searches filled the screen. Miu Miu was No. 1, followed by Chanel, Gucci, Bottega Veneta, and Valentino. The team moved on to trends, which the site tracks using descriptive tags. Each look can have up to thirty, including AMERI-

CANA, ANDROGYNOUS, BABYDOLL, BANTU KNOT, CHAPKA, CHELSEA BOOTS, DOMINATRIX, EARMUFFS, EQUESTRIAN, FACE JEWELS, GAVROCHE CAP, MINAUDIERE, NOMADIC, OCEANIC, PASTORAL, POLKA DOT, RAVE, ROUND BUCKLE, SCHOOLGIRL, SPAGHETTI STRAP, TAUPE, VISIBLE UNDERWEAR, and ZIG ZAG.

Van Houtte's team cycled through a series of slides. GLITTERY was surging (+783 per cent), as were LADYLIKE (+235 per cent) and SKIRT (+30 per cent), while TECHNICAL, ANIMAL PRINT, BODYCON, and PINK were all trending down. Next came a pie graph (N.B.: it's called a "Camembert" in French), which examined the colors of the season.

"There's no more green!" she exclaimed. "It's crazy."

A two-page spread dealt with accessories, but she thought it needed more of a narrative. "If I was to buy this book, I'd be, like, 'I spent this money, but you're telling me that models carry bags and wear jewelry, which isn't really groundbreaking information,'" Van Houtte said. They decided to go more granular. "O.K., a hundred and fifty per cent more bags were carried by hand?" she said. "That's interesting."

She had a hunch that she'd seen fewer sneakers on the runway, but she wanted to know whether the data bore it out. The team went searching in their spreadsheets, and a few minutes later returned with confirmation: SNEAKERS were down thirty-two per cent.

Van Houtte looked at them excitedly. "Guys, this is like gold!"

—Lauren Collins

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RAISED EYEBROWS DEPT.

OUTRAGEOUS

The comedy historian Kliph Nesteroff, forty-three, visited the New York Public Library recently, for an event at the Celeste Bartos Forum—a discussion with the comedian and podcaster Marc Maron, about Nesteroff's new book, "Outrageous: A History of Showbiz and the Culture Wars." A former standup ("I retired at twenty-six"), Nesteroff, who is wiry and feisty, with glasses and a bald head, has written three books about comedy history. He met Maron more than a decade ago, when their paths crossed for Shecky Greene-related reasons, and has appeared on his podcast. Nesteroff, who grew up in British Columbia and lives in Hollywood, was new to the N.Y.P.L., and arrived early. He stopped into "Treasures," an exhibit of highlights from the library's vast collection—a draft of the Declaration of Independence, a rehearsal photo from "West Side Story," Cole Porter's cigarette case, a lock of Beethoven's hair—on the marble-majestic main floor. Nesteroff, whose book is adorned with headlines like " 'Beetle Bailey' Censored for Spoofing Army Brass" and " 'Frito Bandito' Is Subject of Protest" and crammed with arcane facts, seemed startled to encounter a pop-cultural detail with which he was unfamiliar. "No idea who the Nuyoricans are," he said, peering into a vitrine. "How do you pronounce it?"

Nesteroff became a historian inadvertently. "I saw every movie between the age twelve and eighteen—every movie that somebody has heard of. Then all the B movies you hadn't heard of," he said. He also collected vintage vinyl in thrift stores, including comedy albums by comics who were considered too dirty for TV and are less known today. "But their records were best-sellers. If you look at the *Billboard* charts in the sixties, Rusty Warren has three different albums in the Top 100, next to, like, Elvis and the Beatles and the Beach Boys. She made these party records: 'Knockers Up!,' 'More Knockers Up!,' 'Knockers Up '76.' So I was curious about these people," and began investigating, he said. "Most comedians have an interest in comedians who came before them."

Nesteroff strolled past a display of Toscanini's batons and a manuscript of Mozart's Symphony No. 32 in G Major, then admired a mid-century pocket handbook from the Mattachine Society. "For this book, I would research without actually having a goal," he said. "I would just put in quotes, like 'disgusting comedian.' That was very effective. Or 'offensive comedian' or 'vulgar comedian' or 'immoral comedian' or 'disgusting TV show' or 'terrible TV show.'" This yielded many letters to editors. "So much fun," he said. " 'I've never been so offended as on "The Carol Burnett Show" last night, when she made fun of the elderly! I was watching with my

grandmother. I will never watch it again.'" Nesteroff's book posits that arguments about oversensitivity and humorlessness around comedy are as old as comedy itself. "People get apocalyptic today about things, and everybody takes it very seriously," he said. "But I feel like in decades to come it'll sort of look like those letters do now—like a comical thing."

"Outrageous" details reactions to bigoted entertainment, too; some angry letters have been justified. Nesteroff gestured at a poster. "The New York World's Fair 1939 is where television débuted for the American public," he said. "And they tested the transmission with a blackface performance of 'Amos 'n' Andy.'" A display about "Annie" prompted insights about the comic strip's right-wing origins. "He hated F.D.R., Harold Gray—despised the New Deal and would put little messages in 'Annie.' Daddy Warbucks was the character that he sympathized with," Nesteroff said.

"Hey, I see 'The Wiz,'" he went on. He praised Nipsey Russell, then examined some artifacts from the 1975 Broadway production. A not-uncommon reaction to "The Wiz," he said, was " 'What is this woke bullshit? An all-Black "Wizard of Oz"? What is the world coming to?' People thought it was sacrilegious."

Sound check beckoned; downstairs, in the greenroom, Maron awaited, in an olive-drab shirt. "Hey, man!" he said to Nesteroff.

"Hey, buddy!" Nesteroff said. They hugged. "The Albert Brooks thing—it was worth the buildup!" Maron had recently interviewed Brooks for his podcast, after years of trying.

"It was wild," Maron said. They sat across from each other at a snack table, drinking LaCroix and swapping anecdotes about the Friars Club, old Paul Lynde clips, and the sociopolitical prescience of Frank Zappa. Maron said that, during the evening's event, "we don't want to get into you and me talking intellectually about stuff." They should talk, instead, about "the fact that minstrelsy was really the first form of American show business"; popular reactions against ethnic stereotyping; controversies involving Lenny Bruce, the Smothers Brothers, "All in the Family," and the P.M.R.C. Senate hearings; the John Birch Society; the Fairness Doctrine; the rise of radio shock jocks; the Koch brothers; news becoming entertainment; and so on. "You actually can pretty much say whatever you want—it's just whether or not you want to shoulder the consequences," Maron concluded.

"I'm very skeptical when somebody is constantly repeating words like 'freedom' and 'liberty,' because so frequently it's somebody who's opposed to those two things," Nesteroff said.

Had Albert Brooks ever offended anybody? Yes, Nesteroff said—on Jack Paar's talk show in 1973, alongside Truman Capote. According to an angry letter, "The evening with Jack Paar ended with guest Albert Brooks wildly waving his hands and yelling, 'Marijuana!'"

—Sarah Larson

L.A. POSTCARD
LIVE LONG, PROSPER

The other day, Susan Bay Nimoy—actress, writer, director, philanthropist, and widow of Leonard—stood at the entrance of a historic Art Deco theatre in Westwood, which she had helped to restore and convert to a live-performance space. On the marquee, lit bulbs spelled out the theatre's new name: the Nimoy.

"There's a lot of history," Bay Nimoy, an exuberant eighty-year-old, said. "I called Jane Fonda and asked if she would come to the press opening, because her mother, Frances, funded the theatre." More history: during the Second World War, newsreels played at the theatre; "Dr. Strangelove" had its first L.A. screening there, in 1964. Two decades later, when Disney managed the theatre, "Three Men and a Baby" was the opening film. Leonard was the director; Bay Nimoy accompanied him to the première. "It was certainly in the eighties, because I wore a black suit with big shoulder pads, with a lot of jewelled things on them," she said.

In the lobby, large letters spelled out "LIVE LONG AND PROSPER," Leonard's catchphrase from a half century playing Mr. Spock from "Star Trek." "It's from the Jewish tradition," Bay Nimoy said. The "Star Trek" writers, she explained, had been looking for a greeting that would be unique to Spock. Leonard, who grew up Orthodox, in Boston, thought of the Birkat Kohanim, a prayer said by priests with their fingers spread apart. "The priest in the temple would go blah-blah-blah-blah-blah in Hebrew to bless the congregation," she said, making Spock V's with her hands. "It meant, essentially, May peace be with you."

The Nimoy is part of U.C.L.A.'s Center for the Art of Performance. "Theatre for Leonard was his first love," Bay Nimoy said. "That living, breathing black box." At eighteen, he took a train from Boston to Los Angeles, so that he could study at the Pasadena Playhouse. "He looked around, he had to support himself in a variety of ways. Theatre usher, taxicab driver, stocking vending machines—he did all of that." He found work doing Yiddish theatre, and later hired a professor at U.C.L.A. to tutor him in the language.

Bay Nimoy met Leonard in an acting class. (He was the teacher.) Years later, when she was a development executive on the Paramount lot and he was shooting "Star Trek," she looked him up. "We found each other and saved each other's lives is really how it came down," she said.

"Leonard and I came from very poor backgrounds. His father was a barber. My dad was an accountant," Bay Nimoy said. The couple invested their Hollywood earnings in California real estate and contemporary art. "Leonard was

Susan Bay Nimoy

not a fancy person," she went on. When they met, she said, "I was driving a Honda." Their goal was to give their children—he had two, she had one—a buffer, and no more. "They will not be gabillionaires, but they have a leg up," she said. "And the rest we're giving away." They built a Jewish day school (their rabbi asked them to), a new theatre at Griffith Observatory (Leonard loved outer space), and a theatre for Symphony Space, in New York (where Leonard used to perform short stories).

Bay Nimoy popped into the dressing room, which is named for her son, Aaron. That day's matinée, performed for public-school students, was a show about a once vital lower-Manhattan neighborhood known as Little Syria. The creator, Omar Offendum, a Syrian American m.c. and poet, introduced Bay Nimoy to his collaborators. Thanks Joey, the beat-maker, wore Adidas track pants, an Ecuadorian poncho, and a trim, scholarly beard. He was from Brooklyn; his Syrian grandfather was a famous oud player. Ronnie Malley, a multi-instrumentalist from Chicago with Palestinian roots, was wriggling into a black *thobe*.

"We had them made in Qatar because we performed at the World Cup," Offendum said. "It costs more to get them dry-cleaned here than it cost to have them made."

It was time for the show. "This is Leonard's seat," Bay Nimoy said, gesturing to an empty seat on the aisle. "This is mine." She sat down and tipped her face toward the stage.

Leonard died in 2015. "J. J. Abrams came to me," she said. "He said, 'When you feel like writing, call me. I'll give you an office.' And I said, 'Well, when I can get out of bed, I'll call you.'" Eventually, she wrote, directed, and starred in a short film about a septuagenarian architect who loses her husband of many years and has a fling with a man some forty years younger. It was shown at Sundance in 2018.

She is writing again, a one-woman show about the experience of being eighty. "It's bawdy, it's moving, it's very truthful," she said. If it comes to the Nimoy, she plans to be in her seat in the audience. "I can't remember my name, let alone a show," she said. "You know, someone like Helen Mirren can do it."

—Dana Goodyear

SKETCHPAD BY EMILY FLAKE

TIPS FOR FILLING THE DEAD WEEK BETWEEN CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S
SET INTENTIONS FOR THE NEW YEAR
I FIND A VISION BOARD VERY CENTERING.
REVENGE!!
DRIFT AROUND YOUR HOME TOWN IN A FOG OF NOSTALGIA AND WOUNDED PRIDE
SERVES YOU RIGHT YOUR HOUSE IS A VAPE SHOP NOW.
PREGAME FOR YOUR NEW YEAR'S PARTY
WHAT? YOU WOULDN'T RUN A MARATHON WITHOUT TRAINING.
BUILD A COCOON FROM WHICH YOU WILL EMERGE A FAT BUTTERFLY
I WILL BE MAGNIFICENT.
BROOD ABOUT ALL THE CHORES YOU COULD BE GETTING DONE IF ONLY YOU WEREN'T STUCK AT YOUR SISTER'S
THE FACT THAT I'M SAD 'CAUSE I CAN'T REORGANIZE MY PANTRY MIGHT BE THE SADDEST THING OF ALL.
WRITE A SCRIPT FOR YOUR DEAD-WEEK ROMANTIC COMEDY
WILL ENNUI BE ENOUGH TO KEEP THESE TWO LOVEBIRDS TOGETHER?
e. flake

LETTER FROM GAZA

UNSAFE PASSAGE

A Palestinian poet's perilous journey out of his homeland.

BY MOSAB ABU TOHA

After Israeli forces invaded, Mosab Abu Toha fled with his wife and three kids.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MOHAMED MAHDY

When the war comes to Gaza, my wife and I do not want to leave. We want to be with our parents and brothers and sisters, and we know that to leave Gaza is to leave them. Even when the border with Egypt opens to people with foreign passports, like our three-year-old son, Mostafa, we stay. Our apartment in Beit Lahia, in northern Gaza, is on the third floor. My brothers live above and below us, and my parents live on the ground floor. My father cares for chickens and rabbits in the garden. I have a library filled with books that I love.

Then Israel drops flyers on our neighborhood, warning us to evacuate, and we crowd into a borrowed two-bedroom apartment in the Jabalia refugee camp. Soon, we learn that a bomb has destroyed our house. Air strikes also rain down on the camp, killing dozens of people within a hundred metres of our door. Over time, our parents stop telling us to stay.

When our apartment in the refugee camp is no longer a refuge, we move again, to a United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) school. My wife, Maram, sleeps in a classroom with dozens of women and children. I sleep outside, with the men, exposed to the dew. Once, I hear a piece of shrapnel ring through the school, as though a teacup has fallen off a table.

Now, when Maram and I talk about leaving, we understand that the decision is not only about us. It is about our three children. In Gaza, a child is not really a child. Our eight-year-old son, Yazzan, has been talking about fetching his toys from the ruins of our house. He should be learning how to draw, how to play soccer, how to take a family photo. Instead, he is learning how to hide when bombs fall.

On November 4th, our names appear on an approved list of travellers at the Rafah border crossing, clearing us to leave Gaza. The next day, we set out on foot, joining a wave of Palestinians making the thirty-kilometre journey south. Those who can travel faster than us, on donkeys and tuk-tuks, soon come into view again, travelling toward us. We see a friend, who tells us that Israeli forces have set up a checkpoint on Salah al-Din Road, the north-south highway that is supposed to provide safe passage. He says that gunfire there convinced him to turn around. We return to the school.

Mostafa and Yaffa, our six-year-old daughter, are so sick with fever that they can barely walk. My sisters have also been asking us not to go. "Let's not leave them," Maram says. We want to stay for our family, and we want to leave for our family.

Then, on November 15th, I am on the third floor of the school, about to sip some tea, when I hear a blast followed by screams. A type of shell that we call a smoke bomb has gone off outside. People are trying to put out a fire by dousing it with sand.

Moments later, another smoke bomb explodes in the sky above us, spewing a white cloud of gas. We race inside, coughing, and shut the doors and windows. Maram hands out pieces of wet cloth and we hold them to our noses and mouths, trying to breathe.

That night, we hear bombs and tank shells, and I barely sleep. In the days that follow, my throat tastes of gas and I have diarrhea. I cannot find a clean toilet. There is no water to flush. I feel like vomiting.

I have been joking with my family that by my thirty-first birthday, on November 17th, we will have peace. When the day arrives, I am embarrassed. I ask

my mother, "Where is my cake?" She says she will bake one when she moves back into our destroyed house.

On November 18th, Israeli tank shells wreck two classrooms at another school, where Maram's grandparents and paternal uncles are staying. My brother-in-law Ahmad learns that several members of his extended family are dead. My parents urge us not to leave our shelter. But, when we hear the news, we pretend to go to the bathroom and go looking for our relatives.

On the dusty road that leads to the school, a heartbreaking scene greets us. People are fleeing with gas cannisters, mattresses, and blankets. A group of donkeys and horses are bleeding. One horse's tail is nearly detached. When a young man tries to quench its thirst, the water dribbles out of a hole in its neck. He asks me whether I have a knife, to put it out of its misery.

We are relieved to find Maram's grandparents inside, sitting on the floor. As her uncles pack their things, one of them talks about fleeing to the south. Maram's grandparents are pleading with him not to go.

The next morning, I wake at five to an overcast sky. A storm is coming. While everyone is sleeping, I fill a bottle of water from an open bucket, wash, and pray the dawn prayer. Then, at around 6:30 A.M., Maram's uncle Nader comes to our room. He is preparing to leave for the south with his brothers. "If anyone wants to join, we will be at the gate of the hospital," he says.

This time, when I ask Maram whether she wants to go, she says yes. "All our bags are packed," she tells me.

Maram informs her parents of our decision. They cry as she hugs them. Then we both go to the third floor, where my parents are sitting in the corridor on a mattress. They are drinking their morning coffee with two of my sisters and their husbands. I squat, and in a low voice I tell my parents that we are going to try to leave Gaza.

My mother goes pale. She looks at my children, tears in her eyes.

I don't want to hug anyone, because I don't want to believe that I am leaving them. I kiss my parents and shake hands with my siblings, as though I am only going on a short trip. What I am feeling is not guilt but a sense of unfairness. Why can I leave and they cannot? We are lucky that Mostafa was born in the U.S. Does it make them less human, less worthy of protection, that their children were not? I think about how, when we go, I may not be able to call them, or even find out whether they are alive or dead. Every step we take will take us away from them.

Before Maram was my wife, she was my neighbor. In 2000, when I was eight, my father moved us out of my birthplace, Al-Shati refugee camp, and built us the house in Beit Lahia. Maram, a year younger than me, lived next door. I liked her enough that, each school year, I gave her my old textbooks so she wouldn't have to buy new ones.

One day, Maram saw me on the third floor of our family home, peering into the distance through a new pair of binoculars. From our window, I could see the border with Israel. She sent her younger sister to ask me whether I was looking for a girl.

I told Maram's sister that it was none of her business. After that, though, I knew Maram had feelings for me. We started to smuggle one another messages via our little sisters. In 2015, when I was twenty-two, we married.

On the morning that we set out for the south, Maram wears a jilbab and carries Yaffa's blanket, which has the head of a fox and two sleeves, so she can wear it like a cape. We have one litre of water. By the time we gather our things and walk to the hospital gate with Maram's youngest brother, Ibrahim, her uncles have already left.

I hail a teen-ager who is driving a donkey cart. "Going south?"

He has no idea which way is south. "How much will you pay me?" he asks.

I offer a hundred Israeli shekels, about twenty-seven U.S. dollars. Another young man, whose mother uses a wheelchair, splits the cost with us.

Our donkey cart rolls past bombed-out houses and shops. The street is a river of people flowing south, many of them carrying white flags to identify themselves as civilians. Ibrahim jumps off the donkey cart, picks up a stick, and ties a white undershirt to it.

In the crowd, I see a man named Rami, who played soccer with me more than a decade ago. He cries out with joy and asks whether his seventy-year-old father can climb into our cart. We make some space and ride on.

About thirteen kilometres into our journey, we pass Al-Kuwait Square. An Israeli checkpoint looms in the distance. Soldiers are controlling the flow of foot traffic with a tank and a sand barrier. When the soldiers want to block the way, they roll the tank onto the road.

Hundreds of people, young and old, crowd the road in front of the tank. I can think of one other scene like this—the Nakba of 1948, when Zionist militias forced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to leave their villages and towns. In photographs from that time, families flee on foot, balancing what remains of their belongings on their heads.

The children are scared. Mostafa asks me if he can go back north again to his grandmother Iman, who used to tuck him into bed. I don't know what to tell him. We are going to see her, I finally say. Be patient.

As we near the tank, I hold up our stack of travel documents, with Mostafa's blue American passport on top. One of the soldiers in the tank is shouting into a megaphone; another holds a machine gun. I have lived in Gaza for almost all my life, and these are the first Israeli soldiers I have seen. I am not afraid of them, but I will be soon.

We are overjoyed to spot, up ahead of us, Maram's uncles. Ibrahim shouts out. One of them, Amjad, grins and yells back, "You made it!"

The line crawls along. One of Maram's great-uncles, Fayez, is pushing a wheelchair carrying Maram's ninety-year-old great-grandmother. To my surprise, Fayez convinces the soldiers that elders should go through first, with one person to accompany them. But, when two people try to accompany one wheelchair, a soldier angrily orders them to stop. He fires his gun into the ground.

Children scream. Panic ripples through the line. A gust of wind blows, as if to rearrange the stage of the theatre. The tank rolls back onto the road, and about twenty minutes elapse before it backs up again.

We are about to pass the checkpoint when a soldier starts to call out, seemingly at random.

"The young man with the blue plastic bag and the yellow jacket, put everything down and come here."

"The man with white hair and a boy

in his arms, leave everything and come!"

They're not going to pull me out of the line, I think. I am holding Mostafa and flashing his American passport. Then the soldier says, "The young man with the black backpack who is carrying a red-haired boy. Put the boy down and come my way." He is talking to me.

I make the sudden decision to try to show the soldiers our passports. Maram keeps my phone and her passport. "I will tell them about us, that we are going to the Rafah border crossing and that our son is an American citizen," I say. But I have taken only a few steps when a soldier orders me to freeze. I am so scared that I forget to look back at Mostafa. I can hear him crying.

I join a long queue of young men on their knees. A soldier is ordering two elderly women, who seem to be waiting for men who have been detained, to keep walking. "If you don't move, we will shoot you," the soldier says. Behind me, a young man is sobbing. "Why have they picked me? I'm a farmer," he says. Don't worry, I tell him. They will question and then release us.

After half an hour, I hear my full name, twice: "Mosab Mostafa Hasan Abu Toha." I'm puzzled. I didn't show anyone my I.D. when I was pulled out of line. How do they know my name?

I walk toward an Israeli jeep. The barrel of a gun points at me. When I am asked for my I.D. number, I recite it as loud as I can.

"O.K., sit next to the others."

About ten of us are now kneeling in the sand. I can see piles of money, cigarettes, mobile phones, watches, and wallets. I recognize a man from my neighborhood, who is slightly younger than my father. "The most important thing is that they don't take us as human shields for their tanks," he says. This possibility never crossed my mind, and my terror grows.

We are led, two by two, to a clearing near a wall. A soldier with a megaphone tells us to undress; two others point guns at us. I strip down to my boxer shorts, and so does the young man next to me.

The soldier orders us to continue. We look at each other, shocked. I think I see movement from one of the armed soldiers, and fear for my life. We take off our boxer shorts.

"Turn around!"

This is the first time in my life that strangers have looked at me naked. They speak in Hebrew and seem cheerful. Are they joking about the hair on my body? Maybe they can see the scars where shrapnel sliced into my forehead and neck when I was sixteen. A soldier asks about my travel documents. "These are our passports," I say, shivering. "We are heading to the Rafah border crossing."

"Shut up, you son of a bitch."

I am allowed to put on my clothes, but not my jacket. They take my wallet and tie my hands behind my back with plastic handcuffs. One of the soldiers comments on my UNRWA employee card. "I'm a teacher," I tell him. He curses at me again.

The soldiers blindfold me and attach a numbered bracelet to one wrist. I wonder how Israelis would feel if they were known by a number. Then someone grabs the back of my neck and shoves me forward, as though we are sheep on our way to be slaughtered. I keep asking for someone to talk to, but no one responds. The earth is muddy and cold and strewn with rubble.

I am pushed onto my knees, and then made to stand, and then ordered to kneel again. Soldiers keep asking in Arabic, "What's your name? What's your I.D. number?"

A man addresses me in English. "You are an activist. With Hamas, right?"

"Me? I swear, no. I stopped going to the mosque in 2010, when I started attending university. I spent the last four years in the United States and earned my M.F.A. in creative writing from Syracuse University."

He seems surprised.

"Some Hamas members we arrested admitted you are a Hamas member."

"They are lying." I ask for proof.

He slaps me across the face. "*You* get me proof that you are not Hamas!"

Everything around me is dark and frightening. I ask myself, How can a person get proof of something that he is not? Then I am walked aggressively forward again. What did I do? Where will they take us?

I am told to remove my shoes, and a group of us are led somewhere else. Cold rain and wind strike our backs.

"You raped our girls," someone says. "You killed our kids." He slaps our necks and kicks our backs with heavy boots. In the distance, we can hear artillery fire slicing through the air.

One by one, we are forced into a truck. Someone who is not moving lands on my lap. I fear that a soldier has thrown a corpse onto me, as a form of torture, but I am scared to speak. I whisper, "Are you alive?"

"Yes, man," the person says, and I sigh with relief.

When the truck stops, we hear what sound like gunshots. I no longer feel my body. The soldiers give off a smell that reminds me of coffins. I find myself wishing that a heart attack would kill me.

At our next stop, we kneel outside again. I start to wonder whether the Israeli military is showing us off. When a young man next to me cries, "No Hamas, no Hamas!," I hear kicks until he falls silent.

Another man, maybe talking to himself, says quietly, "I need to be with my daughter and pregnant wife. Please."

My eyes fill with tears. I imagine Maram and our kids on the other side of the checkpoint. They don't have blankets or even enough clothes. I can hear female soldiers, chatting and laughing.

Suddenly, someone kicks me in the stomach. I fly back and hit the ground, breathless. I cry out in Arabic for my mother.

I am forced back onto my knees. There is no time to feel scared. A boot kicks me in the nose and mouth. I feel that I am almost finished, but the nightmare is not over.

Back in the truck, my body hurts so much that I wish I had no hands or shoulders. After what feels like ninety minutes of driving, we are taken off the truck and shoved down some stairs. A soldier cuts my plastic handcuffs. "Both hands on the fence," he says.

This time, the soldier ties my hands in the front. A sigh of relief. I am escorted about fifteen metres. Finally, someone speaks to me in what sounds like native Palestinian Arabic. He seems to be my father's age.

At first, I hate this man. I think he is a collaborator. But later I hear him described as a *shawish*—a detainee like us, with little choice but to work for his jailers. "Let me help you," he says.

The *shawish* dresses me in new clothes and walks me inside the fence. When I

raise my blindfolded head, I get blurry glimpses of a corrugated metal roof. We are in some kind of detention center; soldiers walk around, watching us. The *shawish* unrolls what looks like a yoga mat and covers me with a thin blanket. I place my bound hands behind my head, as a pillow. My arms sear with pain, but my body slowly warms. This is the end of day one.

For years, I have dreamed of looking out the window of a plane and seeing my home from above. In my adult life, I have never seen a civilian flight over Gaza. I have seen only warplanes and drones. Israel bombed Gaza's international airport in the early two-thousands, during the second intifada, and it has not operated since.

Most of my friends have never left Gaza. But in recent years, as they have struggled to find jobs and feed families, they have asked, How long should I wait? Some have immigrated to Turkey, and then to Europe. Some envy my three trips to the U.S. Each time I have returned, with photos of unfamiliar cities and trees and snow, people have called me "the American," and asked me why I came back. There is nothing in Gaza, they say. I always tell them that I want to be with my family and my neighbors. I have my house and my teaching job and my books. I can play soccer with my friends and go out to eat. Why would I leave Gaza?

We wake to the sound of a soldier shouting into a megaphone. The *shawish* makes sure everyone is kneeling on the floor. He has told us that we are in a place called Be'er Sheva, in the Negev Desert. This is my first time in Israel.

The youngest of us, whose voice I recognize from the line, suddenly screams out that he is innocent. "I need to see my mother," he says. My feet start to feel numb.

I hear shouting and beating. "O.K., O.K., I will shut up," he says. "But please send me back." More beating follows.

The person next to me asks the *shawish* for water. "No water yet," the *shawish* says. He sounds frustrated, and I sympathize with him. More than a hundred detainees depend on him. When he takes me to the toilet, for the first time since the previous morning, he has to help me open the door and position me to urinate. The stench is very strong.

Breakfast is a small piece of bread, some yogurt, and a slosh of water poured directly into our mouths. I am not hungry, not even for my mother's birthday cake. When I return to the toilet, around noon, the *shawish* tells me that there is no toilet paper or water to wash myself.

Later, a soldier tells the *shawish* that we will be going to see a doctor. I sense relief in the room.

"I will tell him about my diabetes."

"Yes, and I will tell him about my bladder problem."

I will tell him about the pain in my nose, upper jaw, and right ear, where I had surgery a few years ago. Since I was kicked in the face, my hearing is weaker than before.

We kneel outside, with our hands on the back of the person in front of us. Wind strikes us; stones dig into our knees. We are put in a bus and a soldier pushes my head down, even though I can't see anything. Maybe they don't want to look at our faces.

When we exit the truck and my name is called, I am temporarily given my I.D. card. I feel a prick of hope. Maybe they are going to release us.

Inside a building, my blindfold is pulled off. A soldier is aiming an M-16 at my head. Another soldier, behind a computer, asks questions and takes a photo of me. Another numbered badge is fastened to my left arm. Then I see the doctor, who asks whether I suffer from chronic diseases or feel sick. He does not seem interested in my pain.

Back at the detention center, blindfolded again, we kneel painfully for hours. I try to sleep. A man moans nearby; another is hopeful that he will get to go back to the doctor. Late in the evening, a soldier calls my name. The *shawish* leads me to the gate, and a jeep comes to take me away.

I am tied to a chair in a small room. An Israeli officer, Captain T., comes in and asks, "*Marhaba, keefak*?" This is Arabic for "Hello, how are you?"

I am very sad because of everything that has been done to me, I tell him.

Don't be sad, he says. We will talk.

The captain leaves the room and comes back with coffee. A soldier unties my right arm, so I can hold my cup.

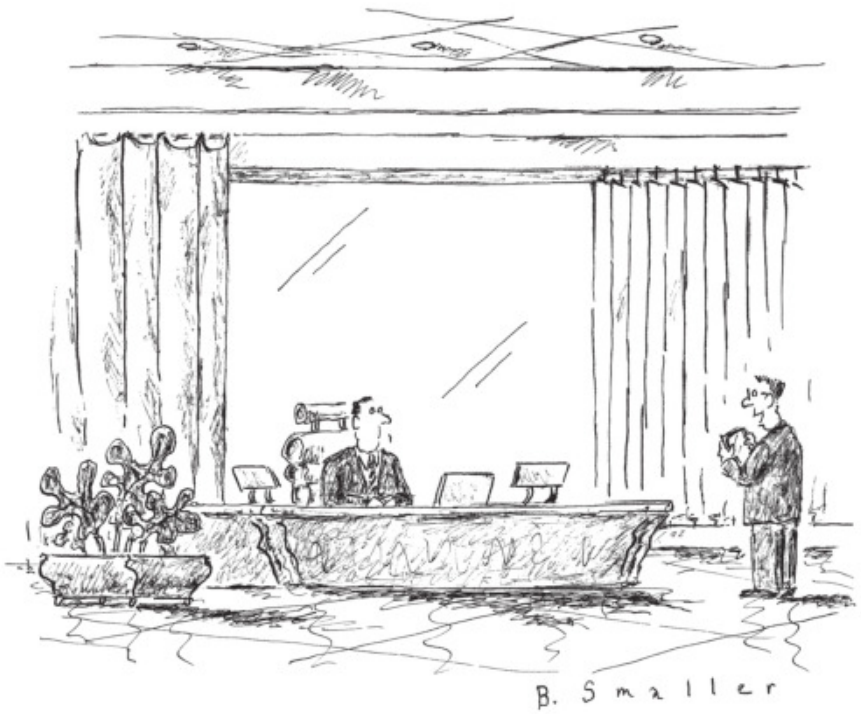
I will tell him everything about me, I say, including where I was on October 7th, but I want him to answer one question.

"Sure. I'm listening."

Will he release me if there is nothing on me?

He promises that he will.

He takes notes as I tell him about my trips to the U.S., my poetry book,



"Better than an answer—I have a tremendous amount of data."

and my English students. I tell him that on the morning of October 7th, when Hamas began to launch rockets at Israel, I was wearing some new clothes, and my wife was taking a photo of me. The sound of rockets made Yaffa cry, so I showed her some YouTube videos on my phone. My father and brothers were on different floors of the house, and we started to shout a conversation out the windows. What's happening? Is this some kind of test?

On Telegram, we started to find videos of Hamas fighters inside Israel with their jeeps and motorcycles, encircling houses and shooting Israeli soldiers. In the beginning, some Gazans seemed excited and happy about the attack. But many of us were perplexed and scared. Although Gaza has been devastated by the Israeli occupation, I could not justify the atrocities committed against Israeli civilians. There is no reason to kill anyone like that. I also knew Israel would respond. Hamas had never done something like this before, and I feared that Israeli retaliation would be unprecedented, too.

Captain T. asks me two questions. First, do I know of any Hamas tunnels or plans for ambushes?

I spent most of the past four years in the United States, I say. I spend my time teaching, reading, writing, and playing soccer. I don't know these things, and I'm not involved with Hamas.

Then Captain T. asks me the names and ages of my family members. Before I leave, he tells me that he hails from a family of Moroccan Jews. There are many shared things between us, he says. I nod and smile, trying to believe that he means what he says.

I ask him what will happen to me. They will look into what I have told him, he says. It may take several days.

"And then?"

"We will either imprison or release you."

I am on a bed, shackled and waiting to go back to the detention center. Someone comes to take me away, but then stops and has a conversation with someone else. They leave me for a while, and I fall asleep to the sound of Hebrew music. I like the singer's voice.

When I wake, a soldier says something in English that I cannot believe.

"We are sorry about the mistake. You are going home."

"Are you serious?"

Silence.

"I will go back to Gaza and be with my family?"

"Why wouldn't I be serious?"

Another voice chimes in: "Isn't this the writer?"

Back at the detention center, as I fall asleep, I think about the words "We are sorry about the mistake." I wonder how many mistakes the Israeli Army has made, and whether they will say sorry to anyone else.

On Tuesday, about two days after I left the school, the man with the megaphone teaches us how to say good morning in Hebrew. "*Boker Tov*, Captain," we say in unison. Some new detainees have arrived in an enclosure nearby, and the soldiers overseeing them seem to be having fun. They sing part of an Arabic children's song, "Oh, my sheep!," and order the detainees to say "Baa" in response.

About an hour later, a soldier calls out my name and orders me to stand near the gate. The *shawish* warns me that they might interrogate me and beat me again. "Be strong and don't lie," he says. I feel a surge of panic.

After an hour, some soldiers approach. One has my I.D., and another drops a pair of slippers for me and tells me to walk. Then one of them says, "Release!"

I am so overjoyed that I thank him. I think about my wife and children. I hope that my parents and siblings are alive.

I spend about two hours at the place where I was interrogated, with the Hebrew music. I am given some food and water, but the soldiers never find my family's passports. I climb into a jeep, surrounded by soldiers. After two hours, I can see around my blindfold that we are getting close to Gaza.

The soldiers get out, smoke, and return fully armed, wearing their vests and helmets. I am thinking about the man I recognized in line, and what he said about human shields. I am starting to wish that I could go back to the detention center when they give me my I.D. card.

Standing against a wall, I tell the closest soldier that I am scared.

"Do not feel scared. You will leave soon."

My handcuffs are cut, and the blindfold is removed. I see the place where I had to take my clothes off. When I see new detainees waiting there, sadness overwhelms me.

I walk fast. Back at the checkpoint, in a big pile of belongings, I find my handbag, but not Yazzan's backpack, where we stuffed our children's winter clothes. A soldier shouts angrily at me. "I was just released," I say.

Back on Salah al-Din Road, dozens of people are waiting. A crying mother asks if I have seen her son. "He was kidnapped on Monday," she says. It is Tuesday. I have not seen him.

I have no money and no phone, but a kind driver offers to drop me off in the southern city of Deir al-Balah. I know that my wife's relatives have taken refuge there, and Maram probably would have joined them with the kids. As the man drives, I keep asking where we are, and he recites the names of refugee camps: Al-Nuseirat, Al-Bureij, Al-Maghazi.

In Deir al-Balah, I ask some young people, who are standing outside a bank, using its Wi-Fi, whether they know anyone from my home town. One of them points me toward a school.

I take off my slippers and start to run. Passersby are staring, but I don't care. Suddenly, I spot an old friend, Mahdi, who once was the goalkeeper on my soccer team. "Mahdi! I'm lost—help me."

"Mosab!" We hug each other.

"Your wife and kids are at the school next to the college," he says. "Just turn left and walk for about two hundred metres."

I cry as I run. Just when I start to worry that I have lost my way, I hear Yaffa's voice. "Daddy!" She is the first piece of my puzzle. She seems healthy, and is eating an orange. When I ask where the rest of the family is, she takes my hand and pulls me as if I were a child.

Maram's uncle Sari rushes off to find Maram. He does not tell her that I have arrived, only that she should return to the school for dinner. When she sees me, she looks like she might collapse, and I run toward her.

I learn from Maram how lucky I was. She used my phone to inform friends around the world, who demanded my safe release. I think about the hundreds or thousands of Palestinians, many of them likely more talented than me, who

were taken from the checkpoint. Their friends could not help them.

The next day, Wednesday, I go to the hospital to have my injuries examined and see patients and corpses everywhere—in the corridors, on the steps, on desks. I manage to get an X-ray, but there are no results: the doctor's computer isn't working. I leave with a prescription for painkillers.

That Friday, a temporary ceasefire begins. Two of my wife's uncles try to go north, only to return an hour later. They say that Israeli snipers have shot and killed two people. At the souk, clothing costs more than ever. I wait five hours at an UNRWA aid center in the hope of receiving some flour, without success. A line to refill gas cannisters seems about a kilometre long.

As soon as the ceasefire ends, about seven hundred Palestinians are killed in twenty-four hours. Until recently, the south has been comparatively safe, but now we hear bombs not far away.

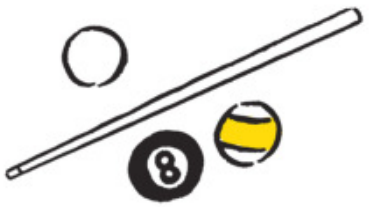
Then the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem calls, advising us to head to the Rafah border crossing.

I struggle to find us a ride. The journey is about twenty kilometres, and the first two drivers we ask are scared. Israeli forces have isolated Rafah from the nearby city of Khan Younis. After a few calls, Maram's cousin, a taxi-driver, agrees to take us.

At the crossing, we wait with hundreds of Gazans for four hours. I have my I.D., which lists my children's names, but only Maram has her passport. I worry that we don't have the right documents to get through the crossing. But, at 7 P.M., officials wave us through the gate, and we join a crowd of exhausted families in the Egyptian travellers' hall. I feel as though I have been cured. The American Embassy gives us an emergency passport for Mostafa, and the Palestinian Embassy gives us single-use travel documents. Then a minibus takes us to Cairo.

In "A State of Siege," the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish writes something that is difficult to translate. "We do what jobless people do," he says. "We raise hope." The verb *nurabi*, meaning to raise or to rear, is what a parent does for a child, or what a farmer does for crops. "Hope" is a difficult word for Palestinians. It is not something that others give us but something that we must cultivate and care for on our own. We have to help hope grow.

I hope that when the war ends I can go back to Gaza, to help rebuild my family home and fill it with books. That one day all Israelis can see us as their equals—as people who need to live on our own land, in safety and prosperity, and build a future. That my dream of seeing Gaza from



a plane can become a reality, and that my home can grow many more dreams. It's true that there are many things to criticize Palestinians for. We are divided. We suffer from corruption. Many of our leaders do not represent us. Some people are violent. But, in the end, we Palestinians share at least one thing with Israelis. We must have our own country—or live together in one country, in which Palestinians have full and equal rights. We should have our own airport and seaport and economy—what any other country has.

An Egyptian friend welcomes us to Cairo. She lives in the Zamalek neighborhood, on an island in the Nile. When I visit her garden, I see flowers that my parents grew in Beit Lahia. On her shelves, I see books that I left behind, under the rubble. When I tell her that her house reminds me of home, she begins to cry.

Later, I find an article in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* about a detention center in Be'er Sheva. It describes the same conditions that I experienced, and says that several detainees have died in Israeli custody. When the Israeli Army is reached for comment about my story, a spokesperson says, "Detainees are treated in line with international standards, including necessary checks for concealed weapons. The IDF prioritizes detainee dignity and will review any deviations from protocols." The spokesperson does not comment on detainee deaths.

On Telegram, I find a video of Khalifa Bin Zayed Elementary, an UNRWA school that Yazzan, Yaffa, and I all attended. Two of Maram's uncles, Naseem and Ramadan, who were born deaf and mute, have been sheltering there with their families. When the kids hear the video, they drop their toys and join me. "There is my classroom," Yaffa says. She started first grade a few weeks ago. Yazzan sees his classroom, too. In the video, the school is on fire.

I learn from a relative that the men in the school were taken to a hospital, stripped, and interrogated by Israeli forces. Afterward, Naseem and Ramadan went looking for their children. My relative says that, near the entrance to the school, a sniper shot them both, killing Naseem.

Naseem's younger brother Sari, whom I saw only days ago, sends me a photo of Naseem, wearing a white doctor's uniform stained with his blood. "These were the only clothes they could find at the hospital," Sari tells me on WhatsApp. Maram sits next to me, weeping.

The next day, Maram is cooking *maqluba*, a dish of rice, meat, and vegetables, which I have not eaten for two months. I am savoring the smell of potatoes and tomatoes when I get a call from a private number.

"Hello, Mosab. How are you?"

It is my father-in-law, Jaleel. At the sound of his voice, Maram's eyes brim with tears. He tells us that everything is fine, even though we know that this can't possibly be true. Then her mother comes to the phone.

"I'm sorry for our loss, Mum," Maram says. I hear her mother sob.

"Mum, are you taking your medicine?"

"Don't worry about me," she says. We never stop worrying about them.

I do not know whether our journey will end in Egypt or continue to the United States. I only know that my children need to have a childhood. They need to travel, and be educated, and live a life that is different from mine.

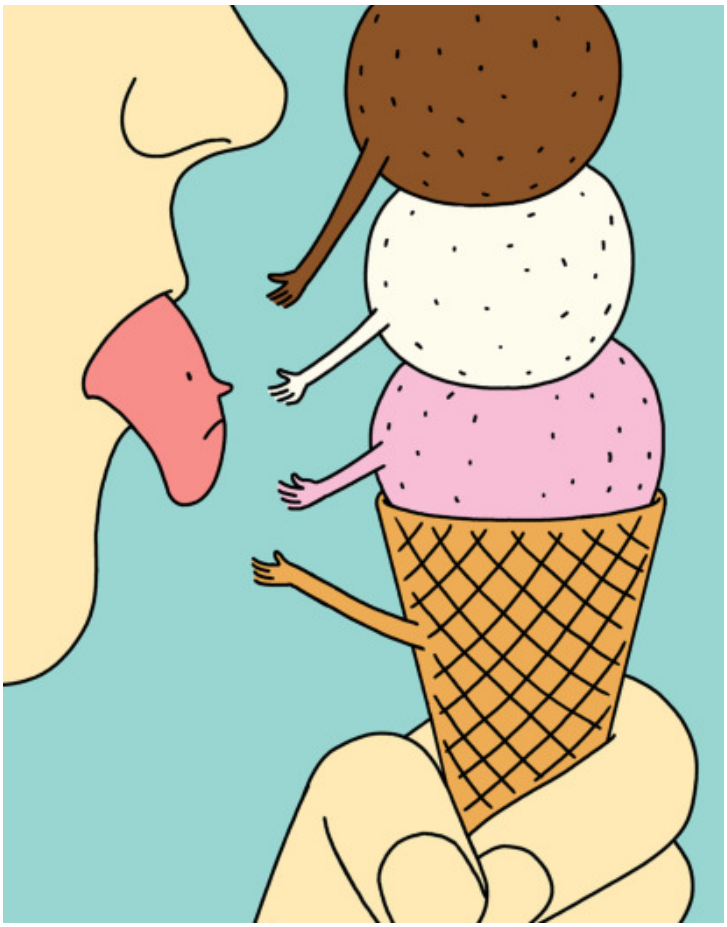
I have come to Egypt with only one book, a worn-out copy of my poetry collection. Since I last read it, I have lived a lot of new poems, which I still have to write. After weeks of typing on my phone, in streets and in schools, I am not used to opening my laptop without worrying about when I can charge it. I am not used to being able to close the door. But one morning I sit at my friend's beautiful wooden desk, in a room full of light, and write a poem. It is addressed to my mother. I hope that the next time we speak I can read it to her. ♦

ANNALS OF ETIQUETTE

TIPPING POINTS

The path from the tossed coin to the swivelling iPad.

BY ZACH HELFAND



Before screens, tipping, like a marriage proposal, was a private affair. Tips can reveal hidden values or the rumblings of the subconscious. A waitress's breast size, for instance, correlates positively with tip size. "Mad Men"-era husbands tipped more when dining with someone else's wife than with their own. The grief-inflected gratitude of the post-pandemic period introduced new tipping behaviors. Etiquette experts studied the so-called guilt-tip boom. The gratuity, like everything else, has gone contactless—the swivelling of the iPad. In the past three years, according to data from the payroll company Gusto, tips in bakeries and cafés are up forty-one per cent. Apparently, we now tip assistant sports coaches (up three hundred and sixty-seven per cent) and theatre-box-office staff (up a hundred and sixty-one per cent). Do you tip the cashier when all she's done is ring up your salad? Don't, and you're a cheapskate. Do, and you're a sucker. Where before you scribbled a tip in the candlelit darkness of a restaurant, now you do it in the spotlight glow of the screen. The polite thing to do, standing in line, is to behave as you would at the A.T.M., or the urinal: look away.

Recently, I spoke with Michael Reed, a butcher at Bob's Quality Meats, a shop in Seattle. "It's a field where it's not customary to tip," he told me, on his day off. Reed has worked in what he calls "retail meat" for twenty years. It's more occupation than passion, but he's proud of the personal touches in his butchery. Immigrants describe, and receive, home-country cuts that don't have English names. Reed knows which customers have bad teeth, and he slices their steaks thin. In 2021, Bob's installed a new checkout system: the swivelling tablet. The shop set its own tipping options—from three per cent to ten per cent. "I didn't think it would generate a significant amount," Reed said. "I turned out to be wrong."

There were some complaints. One person ranted on Facebook. But, wordlessly, compromises formed. Graces were extended. Reed would get a buck or two when he deboned a chicken. He wouldn't when he handed over a slab of bacon. The filet-mignon crowd usually chipped in. Some customers couldn't. (Food stamps can't be used for gratuities.) "The tipping system is there to keep the base price affordable for folks like them," Reed said. Over all, a little less than half of his transactions were tipped. The extra money kept him afloat through the inflation years.

Reed's daughter, who is nineteen, was a tipped employee, too. She worked at Starbucks, where, she noticed, her tips were bigger when she wore makeup. One night this summer, her Chevy Cruze got towed at a local ice rink. She and Reed went together to the impound lot: forms, cashier, the tablet. They owed more than nine hundred dollars, including a "convenience fee," the spiritual cousin of the tip. Reed swiped his card. On the screen, additional gratuity options appeared. "A tip?" Reed said. "You must be out of your mind!" The cashier averted her eyes.

The gratuity, classically, functions as a "thank-you," but it can also serve as a "sorry." People most often tip in settings where the workers are less happy than the customers. The Freudian Ernest Dichter once described the compulsion as "the need to pay, psychologically, for the guilt involved in the unequal relationship."

Michael Lynn, a marketing professor at Cornell, has studied tips for forty years, beginning when he was a bar-

Do you tip the cashier when all she's done is ring up your salad?

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

tender in graduate school. "When you think about it, you go, 'Why would people give up money they don't have to?'" In restaurants, he has found, the answer has to do with social approval. Lynn almost never tips for takeout or counter service, the domain of the iPads. ("I get pissed," he said.) To study how the new tip options affected customer behavior, he conducted research with a laundry-service app, which randomly suggested different gratuity amounts. He found that the more the company asked for the more customers paid. Ratings and retention were unaffected. (When the chain Joe's Crab Shack eliminated tipping, customer satisfaction actually went down.) The dynamic can be compared to masochism.

Tips have long provided a convenient way to foist payment obligations onto others. Kerry Segrave, the author of the comprehensive history "Tipping," identified the gratuity's potential origins, in Europe during the late Middle Ages. By the seventeenth century, visitors to aristocratic estates were expected to pay "vails" to the staff. This might have lowered payroll for the estate itself. At least one aristocrat helped himself to some of this new income stream; he threw frequent parties to increase revenues. The system spread. English coffeehouses were said to set out urns inscribed with "To Insure Promptitude." Customers tossed in coins. Eventually, the inscription was shortened to "TIP." By the end of the nineteenth century, some business owners demanded their employees' tips. Some cafés charged waiters a fee for the privilege of working there. In France, tips were placed directly into a wooden box called *le tronc*, controlled by the proprietor. French waiters went on strike in 1907, identifying two of the great evils of their profession: *le tronc*, and a ban on mustaches. ("Women are quite determined to starve with their children rather than see the whiskers of their husbands still fall under the razor," one newspaper reported.) They eventually prevailed on both counts.

American visitors to Europe brought tipping back to the United States. Perhaps no entity did more to spread the practice than the Pullman Company. George Pullman preferred hiring formerly enslaved Black men as railroad porters. He paid them as little as possible, and used tips as a subsidy. The system spread as far as the train lines. By the nineteen-twenties, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters estimated that the policy had saved the Pullman Company a hundred and fifty million dollars. The porters had long fought to eliminate tipping. Their efforts had been rebuffed by the Pullman Company's president and, later, chairman, Robert Todd Lincoln.

Once the practice gets its hooks in, it can be hard to dislodge. In New York, at the turn of the twentieth century, some enterprising concessionaires paid restaurants thousands of dollars a year to run their coatrooms. These concessionaires became known as the tip trust. At least one dressed young women in theatrical French-maid outfits to collect coats, hats, and tips; the young women turned over all revenues to the trust. (When skimming was discovered, the trusts banned pockets.) Men joked that they bought a hat for five dollars and paid seventy-three dollars a year to wear it. A hat manufacturer sold roll-up models that men could hide inside their coats. The greatest of the tip-trust barons, known as the Hatcheck King, brought in the equivalent of sixty million dollars a year. The trusts were powerful politically. Today, businesses in New York are not allowed to take their employees' tips, with one exception: hat-and-coat checks.

Across Europe, minimum-wage standards were raised, and tipping largely disappeared there. In 1966, the United States Congress lowered the base wage businesses had to pay tipped workers. Nationally, it's still just $2.13 an hour.

Each method of tipping has its own rituals. The phone number left for the waiter or waitress on the bill, below the tip line. The palmed maître d'. I've had barbers who've requested that I denote my Venmo tips as "pizza," to facilitate some minor tax fraud. The most recognizable, these days, is the iPad pirouette, evoking an upturned palm. Gerard Knight led the design team at Square, one of the major tablet-payment providers, when it first rolled out its tipping feature. "Turning around the interface to say 'Give me money' can be kind of an obnoxious gesture," he told me. Originally, the designers used a Trojan horse, of sorts. "The idea was you turned it around anyway, to capture a signature"—most credit cards at the time required one—"and in that process you prompt that customer for a tip." They considered options besides the three-choice menu. "Things like sliders, where you slide from ten per cent to twenty per cent," he said. "All of those things just seemed gimmicky."

Recently, I got in a cab whose screen was in accessibility mode. When it came time to pay, I was presented with a big plus sign and a big minus sign. "Tip is set to zero," a loud voice said. I hit the plus. "Your tip is now five per cent," it said. I punched it again. Plus, minus, plus, plus. "Your tip is now ten per cent. Your tip is now five per cent. Your tip is now . . ."

"Can you hear this?" I asked the cabbie.

"Yeah," he said. I tipped thirty per cent.

Internalizing all the rules can be like learning a language. Do you tip more if the cabbie can see (or hear) the sum? Do you pay the delivery guy based on bill size, distance travelled, weather, or some combination? Do you tip on the tax or on the subtotal? The whole thing is effortful, with a potential for embarrassment. But given the question at hand—what do we owe our fellowman?—shouldn't there be something on the line? One can perceive, in the mental math and the silent negotiations, a lurching attempt at fair play.

One common tipping complaint is some variation of the truffle conundrum: Why should we tip more on the pasta with truffles than on the one without? Call it a wealth tax. There's also a celebrity tax. One waiter, whose diners have included Selena Gomez, Jon Hamm, and Matthew Macfadyen ("He ordered two entrées successively," he recalled. "I was impressed"), said that those who are rich and identifiable typically leave thirty to fifty per cent. "Robert Plant tipped me twenty per cent, which I respected," he said. "There's this paranoia of being despised by the waiter, and they overtip to compensate. I always thought that was pathetic."

Among the ranks of recognized good tippers: Taylor Swift, Amy Schumer, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Barack Obama has been documented tipping twice in one meal. Mark Twain, meanwhile,

stiffed his coachmen. When Leon Trotsky was living in the Bronx, eating his meals at a Jewish dairy restaurant, he refused to tip, and encouraged others to do the same. Soon he was having soup spilled on him. Service providers are purportedly tipped well by mobsters, C.E.O.s, professional golfers, and people who drive pickup trucks. Reputed bad tippers include teachers, lawyers, professional tennis players, and Lexus owners. Germans are O.K. No one wants to see the French. A French friend of mine said that, upon his arrival in America, he felt obligated to tip excessively. "It felt like my duty as a green-card holder," he said. He always caught the barista's eye when he put the dollar in the jar. Once, she turned away after successive dollar-bill drops, so he fished one out and tried again. She noticed. His wife later informed him that he'd reënacted a scene from "Seinfeld."

Larry David drove a cab for a short time, living on fares and tips. "I didn't know why they did it," he said, of the tippers, when I called him at his office in Los Angeles. "Who are those people? Why are they being so nice to a stranger they'll never see again? It was great!" Were he invested with the authority, David said, he'd raise wages so workers wouldn't have to rely on tips, and then he'd publish the Larry David book of tipping. "I'd go over every possible service," he said. "The air-conditioner guys, the refrigerator guys. The moving guys! That's always a problem. What do you tip the guy who moves your couch? Who knows?"

David didn't come up with the "Seinfeld" tipping episode—that was Jeff Schaffer and Alec Berg. "Jeff Schaffer's right here!" David said. He fetched him and put him on the phone.

"I've been waiting in Larry's closet for twenty-seven years to tell this story," Schaffer said. "You know what bothers me? At a place like Kreation, the juice place, sometimes they're not making the juice—the juice is in a refrigerator. You're taking the beverage that's already packaged, and then the tipping gives you these options: eighteen per cent, twenty per cent, twenty-two per cent."

"It freezes you in your tracks," David said.

Schaffer said that the "Seinfeld" episode emerged from real life. He and Berg, trying to walk off some morning writer's block, stopped at a sandwich place near the studio lot. Just as Schaffer put a dollar into the jar, the sandwich maker turned away. "I was, like, He's not going to see my tip! You so rarely have an opportunity to do something good. If it's not seen—"

"What's the point?" David said.

In New York, restaurants get sued all the time for mismanaging, or dipping into, their employees' tips. Mario Batali once settled a case for $5.25 million. Nobu has paid $2.5 million. Jean-Georges Vongerichten has paid $1.75 million. Louis Pechman, a labor lawyer who specializes in wage theft, and who gives clients crumb scrapers with his firm's wage-theft Web site on them, as if they were business cards, won a settlement of $3.1 million from Sparks Steak House. "Where Big Paul Castellano got whacked," he told me recently, at his office, near Grand Central. Pechman represents both waiters and owners. "New York law is very dangerous when it comes to tips," he said. "I tell my management clients, 'Tips are like kryptonite. Just stay away.' " Legally, only food-service workers are entitled to a share of tips. Pechman's cases often come down to one question: What constitutes service?

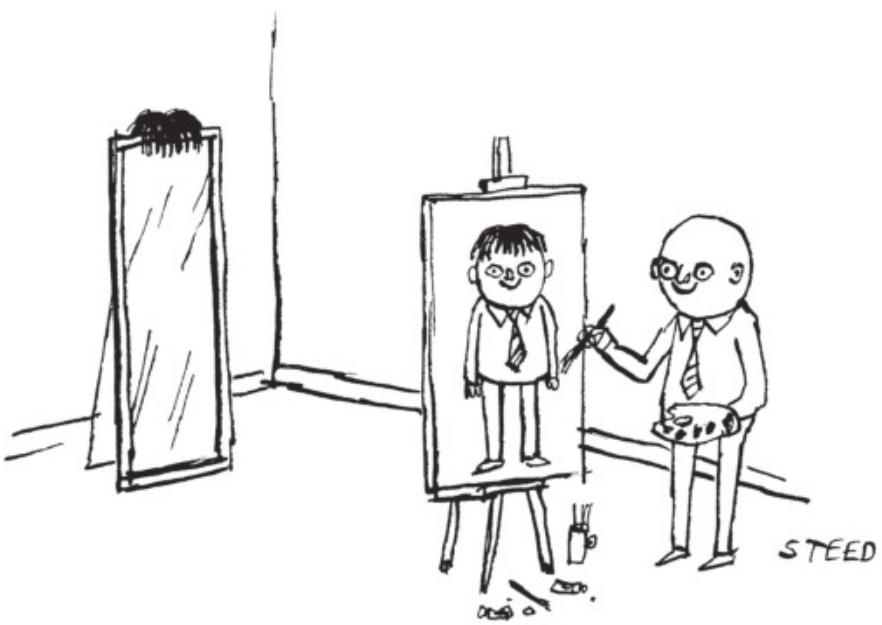
He was preparing a suit against a grill-your-own-meat place. Before initiating legal action, Pechman always visits the business undercover, to scope it out. "I call it 'foodie by lawsuit,' " he said. "It's become kind of my trademark." A couple of weeks later, Pechman and an associate, Christian Mercado, arrived for their scouting mission. "This is nicer than the last place we sued!" Pechman, who has a beard and wore a gray pullover, said, as he climbed into a booth. One benefit of Pechman's methodology is that he gets to try a restaurant from which owners may be tempted to ban him.

Not everyone holds a grudge. "I found my favorite Greek place, in Astoria, this way," Pechman said. "I eat there once a month."

The staff at the grill place pooled their tips—an industry norm. They had approached Pechman alleging that a restaurant manager was claiming a share of the pool for himself, which is illegal. Maimon Kirschenbaum, an attorney for the plaintiffs in the Batali, Nobu, and Vongerichten cases, told me, "At another high-end restaurant"—a non-pooled place—"waiters had to slip the manager a twenty, or else you'd get the worst section of the restaurant, where they put European people."

The waitress came by and we ordered a meat-combo platter, a seafood pancake, and some beers. The restaurant had multiple areas. "How do you decide who goes where?" Pechman asked her.

"The other area is mostly intestines," she said. She brought over a tray of raw rib eye, kalbi, and skirt steak. We looked lost, so she arranged them on the grill



and showed us what to flip and when.

"You serve, you cook, and you teach!" Mercado said.

Here was someone who was earning her tip. One legal quirk is that if the waitress were actually a cook, searing meat in the anonymity of a kitchen, she wouldn't be allowed in the tip pool. Only staffers who interact directly with customers—servers, busboys, runners—are considered food-service workers.

"We've had a lot of cases with sushi chefs," Pechman said. "Is the sushi chef part of the tip pool? Believe it or not, it's a very, very heavily litigated question." His firm had a case on Long Island where a sushi counter was so narrow that the chefs couldn't serve customers directly. ("We had a whole trial on it, and, actually, the width of the shelf became an issue," Vivianna Morales, the trial attorney on the case, told me.) Sommeliers are usually considered tipped service workers. So are baristas, in a coffee shop, but not in a restaurant kitchen—unless customers can see them pouring drinks.

"Hibachi—definitely is, right?" Mercado said. Pechman nodded.

To participate in a society is to constantly accept or provide acts of assistance—doors held, directions given, spots saved, printers unjammed. It would be ridiculous to tip the subway-seat giver-upper. The tip is meant for work, particularly personal work. Diner and waiter enter a relationship, provisional as it may be. But the work of a cook, sweating over a burner, tasting and poking the food about to be put in someone's mouth, is intimate, too. Certain tasks, often traditionally the realm of women—cooking, ironing—are said to be invisible labor. Here, the invisibility is codified into law.

Pechman said that the majority of his wage-theft clients are undocumented immigrants. "Latinos, Russians, Ukrainians, Albanians," he said. "Latino workers are especially abused." The New York City Hospitality Alliance has found that the median pay for front-of-house workers is more than double that of back-of-house workers. Andrew Rigie, the Alliance's executive director, has lobbied the state to allow restaurants the option to distribute tips as they see fit, as long as they agree to pay everyone at least the full fifteen-dollar minimum wage. (Currently, New York City's restaurants pay as little as ten dollars an hour to tipped workers; this is known as the "tip credit," an option the Alliance supports keeping.) Tips effectively facilitate wage discrimination. Black cabdrivers have historically earned less than white ones. In 2018, Eater found that white servers and bartenders nationwide earned a median pay of $7.06 an hour in tips. The median for Asian workers was $4.77. Michael Lynn, of Cornell, has contended that using tips as a means of compensating employees may violate the Civil Rights Act.

The waitress came by with a plate of short ribs. "There's more?" Pechman said. We ate until we ran out of steam. "I gotta eat here again before I sue," he announced. The bill came out. The restaurant used a tablet system. The waitress had no choice but to hover.

Tip prompts have been spotted recently at a Boy Scout popcorn sale, Sonic Drive-Ins, a UPS Store, the self-checkout kiosks at Newark International Airport, the travel Web site Hopper, and a minibar in a Fairmont Hotel, in Canada. A few years ago, Amazon allowed customers to tip rush-delivery workers. The company also lowered some couriers' base pay in direct proportion to the tips they received. In essence, customers were tipping Amazon. (In 2021, after an F.T.C. lawsuit, the company paid a sixty-two-million-dollar settlement; a spokesperson said that the company believes the pay structure was clear on the app drivers used.) A Haitian man named Salvador, who plays a snare drum in the West Fourth Street subway station, told me he recently set up a QR code linking to his Venmo account. He still gets more cash tips, but he likes that the Venmos include personal notes.

Previous instances of tip sprawl have led to rebellion. In the eighteenth century, there was an attempt in London to ban vails. Footmen rioted with swords. In America, in the early nineteen-hundreds, at least six states outlawed tipping, with penalties in one state of up to thirty days in jail for tipper and tippee. Mussolini forbade tipping in hotels, where tourists were routinely swarmed by gratuity seekers. Prohibition didn't work, and neither did the efforts of the Anti-Tipping Society of America, Tippers Anonymous, the Nationwide Operation to Instill Pride (NOTIP), or Tippers International. It was easy enough to write off the protesters as tightwads or cranks. In 1923, the Anti-Gimme League sought to abolish tipping of all sorts, viewing it as gouging; a secondary goal, according to the *Times*, was "to establish a basis of agreement with wives so as to do away with continual and unreasonable demands upon husbands' incomes and earnings." Civic-minded objectors view tipping as undemocratic—begging, basically. The tippee debases himself for spare change. A more common complaint is that tipped income is illogically inflated. High-end servers and bartenders can make six figures; there have been stories of night-club hosts earning a quarter of a million dollars annually. But should banking and lawyering and chief executing be worth any more? We all debase ourselves for money—some more than others.

One solution is to ban the tipped minimum wage. A gratuity is supposed to be an expression of gratitude, not a compulsory subsidy. But a handful of states, including California and Nevada, have done so, and tipping continues unabated. Even the Soviets couldn't get rid of it; there was a persistent tipping problem in the Kremlin coatroom. Trotsky, by then, had been exiled.

Some Michelin-calibre establishments have tried to preëmpt the discretionary gratuity. Alice Waters, at Chez Panisse, introduced a service charge, now seventeen per cent, to spread the money more evenly among the staff. Thomas Keller did something similar at the French Laundry and Per Se. Budget restaurants, where prices matter more, are starting to replace some workers with self-checkout kiosks and QR codes. Carolyn Richmond, a lawyer who represents hospitality employers, told me, "We may not have servers in a few years in all but maybe a few fine-dining restaurants."

Danny Meyer, the restaurateur who owns the Union Square Hospitality

Group, has hated tipping since the eighties, when he opened Union Square Café. Around eight years ago, he noticed that cooks kept leaving his kitchens for higher-paying gigs as waiters. Meyer has said that, since he got into the business, front-of-house pay has climbed two hundred per cent, compared with twenty-five per cent for the back of house. If Meyer increased prices to give the cooks a raise, that would only further balloon server pay. "Tipping was a drug," he told me. "It was addictive to almost everyone."

Meyer called a meeting of his top staff. "I played the worst song that John Lennon ever wrote—'Cold Turkey,'" he recalled. He was switching his restaurants to a "hospitality included" policy; the price on the menu would pay for everything. Other restaurants have tried different versions. A common variation, for private events, is the mandatory service charge. In New York, this is legally thorny. The policy has to be included on every written communication about prices, in at least twelve-point font. Amanda Fugazy, a hospitality lawyer, described clients who put it in their e-mail signatures, for fear of litigation. For Meyer, the tax problems (restaurants get a credit from the I.R.S. for reporting their employees' tips) cost a million dollars. He raised kitchen-staff wages by twenty-five per cent. (He also expanded a family-leave policy.) "We obviously had to raise our prices to do that," he said. "But we never quite raised them enough." Waiters were converted to a salary. Still, half of the front-of-house staff left. The experiment went on. Kitchen morale was great. Customers loved it. But waiter wages kept creeping up at competitor restaurants. Prospective diners, seeing menu prices online, got sticker shock. Meyer said, "We hung in there for five years." Then the pandemic hit, and the waiters couldn't accept the post-lockdown mega-tips. "It just seemed cruel," Meyer said. He capitulated and went back to allowing tips.

Meyer had hoped to start a wider revolution. Few joined him. Two years ago, Shake Shack, which Meyer founded in 2004, added a tipping option for its cashiers. He sounded resigned. "You don't have an opportunity to actually establish a relationship for two hours with that person," he said. In hindsight, his quest didn't have much of a chance. Tipping is a part of the city's infrastructure, as entrenched as the asphalt. As we spoke, Meyer remembered something. When he got into the restaurant business, his first landlord was a man named David Ellis, who'd come into a fortune, and a real-estate portfolio—including the building that housed Union Square Café—thanks to his father. "His father's name was Abraham," Meyer said. "Abraham Ellis was known as the Hatcheck King." Unwittingly, Meyer had built his businesses upon a foundation of tips.

The only coffee shop I could find in all of New York City which prohibits tipping was SEY Coffee, in Bushwick. "It's 'yes' spelled backward," a co-owner, Tobin Polk, told me when I visited. Last year, *Food & Wine* named it the best coffee shop in the state. It was crowded: dogs, air plants coming out of cracks in the wall, knit hats and forearm tats. Polk, who had on a shirt with a map of the constellations and wore his hair in a thin braid, was in constant motion—climbing ladders, lifting boxes, ducking into the roastery in the back of the shop. Before SEY, he'd worked at Stumptown, where he made around ten dollars an hour, with another five or so in tips. "It was really not sustainable," he said. He sent the company's executives a three-part manifesto, complaining about wages, and cc'd his co-workers. They got a two-dollar raise. He eventually got fired.

The no-tipping policy at SEY was the idea of his co-owner, Lance Schnorenberg, on the day before the shop opened. "He was just, like, 'Fuck that,'" Polk said. Polk is now the policy's chief evangelist. "Wages should be a fair trade for work," he said. "Tipping is sort of like pity for somebody who's not making a decent wage. It's clearly just a way to shift more power into the hands of the people who already hold power."

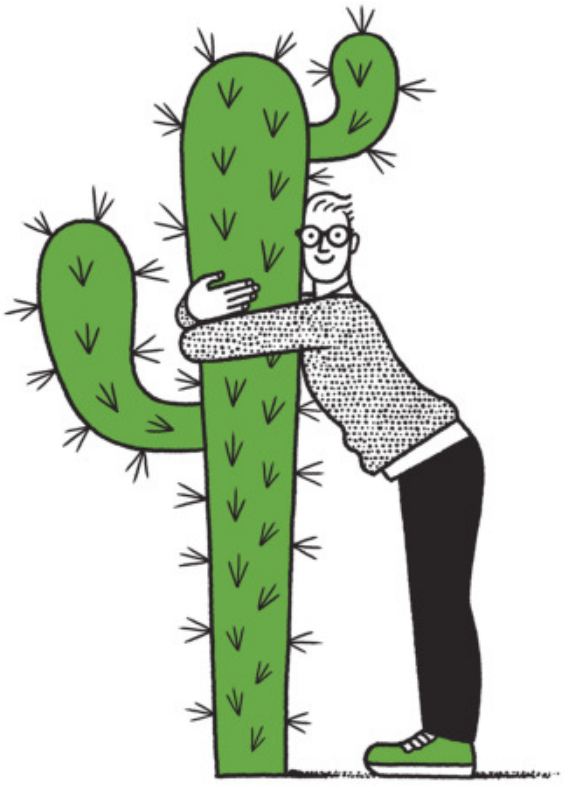
We sat down at a high top, and he brought me a carafe of coffee. "The culture is hooked on tipping," he said. "My deli guys, I tip them every time. And you want them to *know* every time you tip them. But the person who's actually getting the dopamine hit off of that is you, the tipper. What does that mean?"

Polk was initially worried that the math wouldn't work, but SEY gets by. Wages now range from twenty-eight to thirty-five dollars an hour. "It's not *that* difficult a problem to solve," he said. "If you need six dollars to cover everything it takes to make that cup of coffee, then you need to charge six dollars." SEY's drip coffee runs four dollars—pretty good for a high-end product. They're increasing prices by a dollar next year, to fund a recent pay increase. "But it's still a clean five," Polk said. "It's not a maybe-six, or a guilty-five."

Staff members tend to like the policy philosophically. During busy times, they like it less. "The thing is, I don't think customers should have to subsidize our pay," a barista named Aaron Sanders ("like Bernie") told me. He had dreadlocks tied up and wore a shirt with a sunflower on it. "I just—I miss the tip because extra money is extra money."

SEY posts a sign by the payment tablet announcing that the establishment is "proudly gratuity-free." Some customers insist. Most are used to it. Among a small portion of regulars, nice things started happening. Instead of tips, they brought in gifts: pastries, beer, homemade cakes. There was the occasional barter. It felt thoughtful, something approaching a community. "On maybe two or three occasions, somebody gave me a joint," Sanders said. "Once, I got shrooms. But it was a microdose."

He went on, "Sometimes other people will force tips, because they're so used to giving. They'll slip a five under here," he said, pointing under the serving tray. "We'll come bus the table, and there's money. What are we going to do, throw it away?" The staff stashes it in what they call their "wine fund." They don't use it for wine; two different regulars already bring them a bottle every week or two. Someone had the idea of using the money to stock up on tampons and pads for the bathroom. But they've got enough of those now. "It's ballooned up to a couple hundred dollars," Sanders said. "We don't take it. It's unfortunate, because it would be great to use it to buy lunch. The thing is, Tobin does buy us lunch sometimes! So I can't really complain. But I also would like to use it." The employees toss the money into a bag, which sits there, growing fatter. ♦



NATURE, WOW

BY COLIN NISSAN

Spend five minutes in nature and you'll see what everyone's talking about, with the mountains and zoos and watermelons. It's breathtaking.

And what about salmon, just swimming around, completely unfazed by how wet they're getting? If you want to see for yourself, there are some great documentaries about how wet they get.

There's such a breadth of animals besides just wet ones and dry ones. There are shy animals, like the hermit crab, and outgoing animals, like the gibbon, shaking you down for your KIND bar in the rain forest.

Nature has trees all over the place. Without trees we wouldn't have many of the leaves and branches that we enjoy today. If trees didn't produce oxygen, we'd be dead. If they didn't produce maple syrup, we'd be dead and slumped over a stack of inedible pancakes.

Horses are by far the most majestic animal that you can lose your life savings on. There are no sure bets in nature, not even Sleeper's Revenge.

Seahorses aren't horses, but be careful: you can lose money on them, too.

People are curious about nature. That's why there are so many Google searches about it, such as "Which snakes are venomous?" And "Quick remedies for throat closing." And "Can I write out my will on a leaf?" And "How to prepare a body for an open casket after lots of snake bites." And "Explaining to your children that a snake killed their dad." And "Places to move where there are less snakes."

There's something for everyone in nature, even deserts, for people who love the beach but hate enjoying themselves, and for outlaws going after the son of a bitch who killed their daddy in cold blood for two measly gold pieces and an old pocket watch that wasn't even tickin'.

Researchers have spent years trying to unlock the mysteries of nature, like why the plural of deer is also deer, and why sunsets are free but paying a taxidermist for one ferret cost me almost a grand. Twelve hundred with the sailor outfit.

If you're rich, you can see nature's higher-end stuff, which is only kept in special preserves. Or even travel to one of the natural wonders of the world, which are teeming with stunning souvenir shops.

Nature is famous for its calm and tranquillity. A good example is the beautiful silence right after a school of piranhas goes to town on a carp.

If you live in the suburbs, you likely own some nature that's right up against your neighbor's nature, which can create a tricky situation with that rhododendron that's in no man's land, the one that Mike insists on pruning like it's his. But it's not his. You know it and Rhododendron Mike knows it.

Nature can also be found above your head, in the form of birds, but don't let that stop you from enjoying them, either by waiting until they come down or by making them come down, if you know what I mean.

There are so many different sides to nature. One minute you're hunting grouse. The next minute your wealthy father-in-law turns his Winchester on you and asks if you overheard anything he said in the parlor last night. The next minute you're playing him the audio you recorded of him discussing his "little business deal." The next minute he's asking how much it'll cost him for you to destroy that and never speak of it again. The next minute you tell him you'll have to think about a number. The next minute you're back to hunting grouse, but, boy, is it tense.

Safaris are a great way to see a decent part of Tampa. F.Y.I., Busch Gardens no longer allows outside food—I had to wolf down three P. B. & J.'s at the gate.

The big takeaway here is that we need to do everything we can to live in harmony with nature or we can kiss those watermelons goodbye. That means listening when nature is trying to tell us something, and also cutting ourselves some slack if we can't decipher nature's cryptic messages amid all the intense weather and natural disasters. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

THE VENTRILOQUIST

How Hollywood's most in-demand script doctor found his own voice.

BY PATRICK RADDEN KEEFE

When Scott Frank was a child, his father, Barry, bought a small Cessna airplane, and on weekends the two of them would fly. This was the mid-nineteen-seventies, in Los Gatos, California. Barry was a Pan Am pilot, and he believed that in some lines of work, as Scott later put it, "fear is your friend." Upon reaching an altitude of two miles, Barry would say, "Scott, if I had a heart attack right now and you had to land the plane, where would you land?" Scott would scan the horizon for a break in the trees, his heart pounding to the rhythm of the ticking clock Barry had imposed: *The plane is going down*. Scott was a sensitive child with a vigorous imagination, and these impromptu exercises in flight instruction were slightly traumatic. He never learned how to fly a plane himself. Instead, he became one of Hollywood's most prolific and successful screenwriters.

Frank tends to obsess about the beginning of any story: how can he introduce a character with a few deft strokes so that the audience is immediately invested in what happens to her? He has devoted entire months just to cracking an opening scene. But he also excels at endings. In the mid-nineties, he was adapting "Out of Sight," a novel by Elmore Leonard. The book culminates in a mansion outside Detroit; the federal marshal Karen Sisco (Jennifer Lopez, in the film) shoots the escaped bank robber she loves, Jack Foley (George Clooney), in the leg, then arrests him. But the movie version couldn't end with Clooney returning to prison and Lopez just going home. Frank needed a tiny dose of hope: nothing cheesy, but something in keeping with Leonard's playfully sardonic tone. So he invented a coda. Clooney is shackled in the back of a prison van, with Lopez sitting up front. She can at least escort him back to the penitentiary in Florida. Then a new piece is suddenly added to the chessboard. Another inmate, played by Samuel L. Jackson, joins them for the ride. His name is Hejira.

FOLEY: *Hejira*? What kinda name is that?
HEJIRA: The Hejira was the flight of Mohammed from Mecca in 622.
FOLEY: The flight?
HEJIRA: The brothers in Leavenworth gave me the name.
FOLEY: You were at Leavenworth, huh?
HEJIRA: For a time.
FOLEY: Meaning?
HEJIRA: Meaning time came, I left.
FOLEY: You busted out?
HEJIRA: I prefer to call it an exodus from an undesirable place.
FOLEY (*interested now*): And how long was it before they caught up with you?
HEJIRA: That time?
FOLEY: There were others.
HEJIRA: Yeah. That was the ninth.
FOLEY (*really interested*): The *ninth*?

Hejira mentions that he was supposed to leave for Florida the previous night, but for some reason "the lady marshal" wanted him to ride with Foley. A shot of Lopez, her face giving nothing away. "Maybe she thought we'd have a lot to talk about," Clooney murmurs. "Long ride to Florida." And the credits roll. The scene lasts just two minutes. Frank can stick a landing.

Screenwriting looks as if it should be easy, but it isn't. In 1925, Herman Mankiewicz ("Citizen Kane") sent a telegram to his friend Ben Hecht, the playwright, trying to lure him from New York to Los Angeles. "MILLIONS ARE TO BE GRABBED OUT HERE AND YOUR ONLY COMPETITION IS IDIOTS," he wrote, adding, "DON'T LET THIS GET AROUND." Countless books and seminars and podcasts offer advice to aspiring screenwriters, as if any idiot *could* do it. Yet the form is notoriously confounding. It's one thing to write a movie; it's another to get it made, and another altogether for it to be any good. And, as Frank points out, the bad ones are "just as hard to write as the good ones." A formatted screenplay page equates to about a minute of screen time, so each scene needs the abbreviated clarity of a haiku. Screenplays "are this unique, weird thing," Frank says—more disciplined than playwriting, and with a much faster tempo. The tools of the novelist are mostly off-limits: no extensive character description, no metaphors. Frank has written fiction, and finds it easier. Scripts, he says, are "more of an exact science."

You can't make a Hollywood movie without a script, yet a screenwriter, unlike a novelist or a poet, must eventually hand off his precious creation to a whole team of people, and the first thing they want to do is change it. Even at the highest levels, the job can make you feel stunted and contingent. The novelist and screenwriter John Gregory Dunne once observed that just wanting to be a screenwriter is like just wanting to be a copilot; Frank is partial to that analogy, and not merely because of the aviation angle. Though he fiercely believes that screenwriting is an art form, he acknowledges that, in the world of streamers and big studios in which he operates, screenplays aren't so much written as built. Why would writers subject themselves to such a humbling vocation? There's the money, certainly, but the movies also possess a magnetic allure. An untold number of great novels have gone unwritten while their authors foundered in Hollywood. At the height of his literary powers, F. Scott Fitzgerald took time out to ride a desk at M-G-M, writing lacklustre scripts that never made it into production. Billy Wilder joked that Fitzgerald was like "a great sculptor who is hired to do a plumbing job."

When the Writers Guild of America went on strike earlier this year, the awkward truth was that most of the union's eleven thousand five hundred members were employed only intermittently as screenwriters. To be a so-called "working writer"—someone making a steady living off screenplays—is already to be a member of an exclusive club. When success

Before Scott Frank left the rewrite business, he says, he commanded the "insane" fee of three hundred thousand dollars a week.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GREG MILLER

comes, it tends to be fleeting. Frank is one of only a handful of American screenwriters who have managed to write good films and enjoy consistent success for four decades. His first movie, a cop-goes-undercover-in-high-school stinker called "Plain Clothes," came out in 1988, and he has since had fifteen films released, across disparate genres, from "Get Shorty" to "Minority Report" to "Marley & Me" to "Logan," along with several streaming series, most notably the 2020 Netflix megahit "The Queen's Gambit," which he wrote, produced, and directed.

Frank is a commercial writer. He has never worked in independent film. Craig Mazin, who wrote the HBO series "The Last of Us" and "Chernobyl," told me, "In a good old-fashioned vaudevillian sense, Scott worries about the audience," adding that he regards Frank as "one of the best screenwriters of all time." The writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson told me that Frank's work reminds him of Hollywood's golden age. "He's a formalist, and I mean that as the highest compliment," Anderson said. "It's what I always admired and wanted to emulate. He understood classic structure in a way most people can't ever grasp, so they end up having to be 'inventive.' His scripts have always felt like they had one foot in the nineteen-thirties or forties."

Frank's IMDb page obscures the true extent of his contributions to cinema, because he has also enjoyed a quiet, and extremely lucrative, sideline as perhaps the most in-demand script doctor in Hollywood. Studios summon him to punch up dialogue or deepen a character or untangle a contorted third act. For such assignments, which are generally uncredited, he commands a fee that he acknowledges is "insane": three hundred thousand dollars a week. Most jobs last a few weeks. He has done rewrites on nearly sixty films—possibly more than any other contemporary screenwriter—including "Saving Private Ryan," "Night at the Museum," "Unfaithful," "The Ring," and "Gravity." (He also did "a lot of the X-Men movies," he told me, adding, "I don't remember their titles.")

It's hard to turn down this kind of assignment, and Frank is keenly aware that the opportunities afforded to him are something most screenwriters could only dream of. Nevertheless, it can be demoralizing to expend so much of one's creative energy servicing someone else's vision. Steven Soderbergh, who directed "Out of Sight" and is a close friend, described Frank to me as "a ventriloquist." Just as Frank can inhabit movie characters so completely that he can compose fluid dialogue in their precise manner of speaking, he is adept at channelling the voice of a director or a previous screenwriter. The producer Nina Jacobson, who has worked as a senior executive at three studios, told me, "Scott folds himself into the process. He's sort of foolproof, in terms of being able to diagnose what you need, team up with the director, and deliver it." Frank's ability to offer solutions within an existing stylistic idiom makes him a "chameleon," she said, adding, "You'd be hard-pressed to find an executive or producer who doesn't think of him first virtually anytime they have a problem on a script." The one trouble with having this talent, Jacobson pointed out, is that it can lead you to "spend your whole career rewriting other people's movies."

The two qualities that Frank finds most appealing in a character are competence—at robbing banks, playing chess, being an astronaut—and a sense of humor. He possesses both. In our first e-mail exchange, he warned, "My work doesn't so much change the aesthetic as it does provoke adjectives like 'solid' and 'dependable.'" He pointed out that, unlike such peers as Aaron Sorkin or Nicole Holofcener, he lacks the kind of idiosyncratic writing style that becomes a signature. When the British Academy of Film and Television Arts invited him to deliver a screenwriting lecture, in 2012, he told the audience, "I'm a bit of a hack." Frank said to me that he questioned the entertainment value of a Profile of him: having reached his sixties, he reflected, "I find myself very content, not particularly tormented. Even my demons have gotten bored." But one reason he's taken so many rewrite jobs is that he is compulsively obliging. So we met for a series of lunches, often at Café Cluny, a West Village restaurant that serves as a canteen for Hollywood types in exile.

Frank has soft features and dresses in soft, dark clothes. His dark hair and neatly trimmed beard are going gray. But the actress and director Jodie Foster, a longtime friend, noted, "Even though he's sixty-three, he still *feels* like a fourteen-year-old boy. He giggles a lot." Several people who know Frank well mentioned the contrast between his writing, which can be dark and extremely violent, and his twinkle-eyed irrepressibility. He and his wife, Jennifer, a conceptual artist, have been married for thirty-five years, and they raised three children in Pasadena—adjacent to the social-professional vortex of Hollywood but far enough away to avoid its more virulent aspects. A decade ago, the Franks moved to New York, settling in an apartment around the corner from Café Cluny. "Like so many assholes who've come before me, I spend the summer in Martha's Vineyard," Frank told me, adding, "I'm also that asshole who goes to Connecticut on weekends." With a hint of self-laceration, he admitted that he'd taken many jobs chiefly so that he could buy nicer homes. "I even rewrote a movie called 'Paycheck,'" he told me.

One thing that sets Frank apart even among talented screenwriters is the sheer fecundity of his imagination. As Soderbergh put it, Frank has "ideas just pouring off him." In elementary school, he would make up stories and occasionally present them to others as though they were true. After one such composition, involving domestic violence, prompted an alarmed teacher to call his home, Barry Frank held up a flight manual in one hand and a novel in the other and said, "Scott, one of these is true, and one of these is fiction. Do you know the difference?" From then on, anytime Scott wrote a story, he would pencil "FICTION" at the top of the page.

He was about eleven when, at the grocery store with his mother, he was browsing through a carrousel of paperbacks by the register and discovered the screenplay for "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." This was fortuitous, not least because screenplays were rarely published then—even scripts for successful movies weren't perceived to be of literary interest. "Butch," however, had been written by one of the great practitioners of the form, William Goldman, who also wrote "Marathon Man" and "All the President's Men." Goldman's style on the page was visceral and conversational, as if he'd just walked out of the movie himself and was now breathlessly recounting it to you. Never had the words "CUT TO" been deployed with greater brio.

At fifteen, Frank saw "Dog Day Af-

ternoon" at the Century cinema in San Jose, and, at the point in the movie when the bank robber played by Al Pacino starts chanting, "Attica! Attica!," the audience rose to its feet and chanted along with him. Even today, Frank recalls the experience as a kind of religious awakening.

His parents were dubious about his interest in the cinema. "*Pilots* can write," Barry said, suggesting that Scott pursue a real career and save screenwriting for weekends. But in 1980, when Scott was a nineteen-year-old student at the University of California, Santa Barbara, he wrote his first script: "Little Man Tate," a comedy about a seven-year-old prodigy being raised by a single mother. In an early scene, one-year-old Fred Tate is at a diner, repeating what sounds like a fragment of baby talk, "Koffer." His mother has no idea what he's saying until she notices the manufacturer's name on the plate he has been eating from—and realizes that he can read. Like many Hollywood scripts, it spent years in development. Jodie Foster eventually directed and starred in the movie, which came out in 1991. Foster was raised by a single mother and had been a prodigy herself, delivering, at the age of twelve, a discomfitingly assured performance as a child prostitute in "Taxi Driver." She told me that when she read Frank's script she responded to "the autobiography of it." She felt a kinship with Frank, she added, because he, too, had been something of a prodigy.

Lindsay Doran was a young studio executive in L.A. when, in 1984, she picked up the script for "Little Man Tate." She experienced a jolt reading the scene with the plate. "I remember my hand snaking to the phone almost involuntarily," she said. "I thought, Who *is* this guy?" When Doran was appointed vice-president of production at Paramount, she offered Frank a contract and an office on the lot. Like other Hollywood success stories, Frank has been known to reminisce about his humble early days as a bartender. But, as Tony Gilroy, another prolific screenwriter, who wrote and directed "Michael Clayton," points out, Frank broke into the business almost immediately. "I think he tended bar for, like, twelve minutes," Gilroy said.

The writers' floor at Paramount was not so different from the one where F. Scott Fitzgerald had toiled at M-G-M.

"Can you buy me a six-pack?"

• •

But Frank loved it. He and Doran developed a campy Hitchcockian thriller called "Dead Again," which Kenneth Branagh directed and starred in, alongside Emma Thompson. One character butchers another with a pair of scissors. (After Jordan Peele released his 2019 horror film, "Us," he acknowledged his debt to "Dead Again" for the scissors-as-murder-weapon motif.) Branagh's movie, which was released in 1991, was a hit. Friends of Frank's wife asked if she felt safe sharing a room with the twisted fellow who had written it. In one memorable scene, Andy Garcia, playing an ailing chain-smoker who has had a cancer operation, inserts a cigarette directly into the breathing tube in his trachea. To Doran, "Dead Again" captured "the essence of Scott Frank—funny, mysterious, cynical, but also somehow hopeful." She coined a term for it: film blanc.

When Frank goes to movies, he can sometimes predict when people will get up to use the bathroom. A lapse in the action, half an hour in—one character says to another, "So, what made you want to become a cop?" Frank believes that moviegoers, in an almost Pavlovian way, have learned to recognize "baldly expositional" writing as a sign that they might safely sneak out for a bit. One conundrum of screenwriting is how to smuggle into the mouths of your characters the necessary information that a novel can just *tell* the reader. Frank tries to avoid disquisitions, and if he can't avoid them he injects an element of surprise. The exposition in his scripts is often imparted by an eccentric minor character, in an unusual milieu: in "Dead Again," Robin Williams, in a bloody butcher's apron, talks to Branagh and Thompson about reincarnation, upon which the plot hinges; in "Minority Report," Tom Cruise sneaks into a greenhouse, where a comically brusque botanist divulges secrets about the police state they live in. To hold the interest of a jaded audience, nothing is more important than unpredictability—a promise that if you look away you might miss something.

"Most people can do story *or* character," Stacey Sher, who produced "Get Shorty" and "Out of Sight," told me. "Scott can do both, and that's really rare." Character always comes first for Frank, however. He avoids outlines, preferring to navigate his scripts without G.P.S. Ideally, his characters will become so fully realized that they'll grab the wheel and steer the narrative in unexpected directions. By forging story to fit character, rather than the other way around, Frank

"Were we expecting a baby?"

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often ends up surprised himself. One of his daughters, Stella, told me that as a child she would fall asleep "to the sound of him typing." When she walks in on him at work, she finds him mouthing dialogue. If it's going really well, he sometimes laughs in delight.

Because Frank has such intuitive mastery of narrative structure, he finds rewriting other people's screenplays easy. "Scripts become transparent if they're not my own," he told me. He subscribes to a Billy Wilder adage: "If you have a problem in the third act, the real problem is in the first act." Often, studio executives will have mandated cuts to the script's first sections, because they want the movie to get to the point, but the abbreviated opening means that the audience never becomes attached to the characters enough to be concerned about their fates. At the end of such a movie, Frank observed, viewers "understand how they're *supposed* to feel—but they don't feel it." This is one reason that he is not overly alarmed about a future in which artificial intelligence replaces screenwriters. A.I. can certainly assemble a recombinant screenplay by drawing on the collected works of people like Scott Frank, and the result may even be schematically sound—but getting an audience to really care about what happens to fictional characters requires a different sort of magic. The Tom Cruise character in "Minority Report" is, essentially, a fascist: a cop who works for a futuristic "pre-crime" unit that apprehends people who intend to break the law before they can pull it off. But in Frank's rendering, he is also a man who has lost his own child—a son who was abducted—and is coping with that loss by trying, in extreme ways, to stamp out crime forever. On paper, we should not find a protagonist with this job description sympathetic. Yet we do.

On rewrites, Frank tends to work quickly—and often under enormous time pressure. Nina Jacobson told me that Frank was brought in to rewrite "The Hunger Games: Catching Fire" when the film was just weeks from production. She likened the process to "laying down new train track while conducting the moving train at the same time." On his own projects, it takes a year or more to write a script. He always starts with the first scene. William Horberg, who produced "The Queen's Gambit," recalls Frank pitching what became the opening of the series: "He said, 'You're in this hotel room. This girl throws open the curtains. There's somebody in the bed, we don't know who it is. She's hungover. She goes down in the elevator and through the hotel and into this big room, and it's a *chess tournament!*'" This was not the beginning of the 1983 Walter Tevis novel upon which the series is based, but a scene from later in the book. Frank plucked out that moment, Horberg said, and "it just established the whole show."

Book adaptations are Frank's specialty. Translating a novel for the movies, especially a popular one, is often fraught. After the success of "Dead Again," Frank signed on to adapt the Elmore Leonard novel "Get Shorty." Before he started writing, he had lunch with Leonard at the M-G-M commissary. Leonard once published a list of ten "rules of writing," which included "Avoid detailed descriptions of characters" and "Don't go into great detail describing places and things." His novels are lean and well paced, like good screenplays, so you might suppose that they'd transfer easily to the screen. But at lunch Leonard regaled Frank with horror stories about how much he hated all the adaptations of his books. The young screenwriter wanted very much to impress the older novelist. By the time Leonard said, in parting, "Have fun," Frank was nauseous.

Faithful adaptations usually make terrible films. There are exceptions: Frank especially admires Ted Tally's script for "The Silence of the Lambs," which, apart from some judicious pruning, seems to have been lifted directly from the Thomas Harris novel. The screenwriter Steven Knight has remarked that, if a book is a mountain, then a good adaptation is a painting of the mountain—a vivid impression that can never be as multidimensional as its subject but that retains its essence. The first time Frank read "Get Shorty," he went through it with a green highlighter, coloring the parts he thought he might use. When he finished, practically the whole book was green. With any adaptation, he reaches a point where he must decide what the novel means to him, then build the script around that core idea, discarding everything else.

One theme Frank frequently returns to is reinvention. He often invokes a famous chapter in Dashiell Hammett's "Maltese Falcon" which was left out of the 1941 film. During a respite from the action, the hardboiled detective Sam Spade relates a seemingly extraneous story about a Tacoma man named Flitcraft, who has a near-death experience when a falling beam at a building site almost kills him. Shaken, Flitcraft radically changes his life, abandoning his family and leaving town. The punch line

is that when he reëmerges, in Spokane, after several years of drifting, he ends up more or less re-creating his old life, only with a new woman and a new kid. Hammett fans have long puzzled over this enigmatic digression. To Frank, the Flitcraft parable illustrates how "a single moment" can cause a person to reassess who they are and who they want to be. The name of his production company is Flitcraft, Ltd.

Chili Palmer, the hero of "Get Shorty," is a loan shark who doesn't want to be a loan shark anymore. He wants to be a movie producer. Adapting Leonard books is tricky, Frank told me, because they're "all talk." You can get halfway through one before the plot kicks in. But Chili was a Flitcraft type, and Frank knew how to write such a character. Departing from Leonard's book, he imagined Chili as more of a movie fan, allowing the character's wiseguy savvy to be comically offset by flashes of childlike enthusiasm. In one scene, Chili (played by John Travolta) is accosted in a parking garage by a burly leg-breaker named Bear (a pre-"Sopranos" James Gandolfini). Bear, a former Hollywood stuntman, has repeatedly tried to beat Chili up, but Chili keeps getting the better of him—this time kneeing him in the face. As Bear wheezes on the floor, Chili suddenly changes the subject:

CHILI: So . . . how many movies you been in?

BEAR: About sixty.

CHILI: No shit? What're some of 'em?

"Get Shorty," which was directed by Barry Sonnenfeld, came out in 1995, and was a commercial and critical hit. Even Leonard liked it. He later said to Sher, "I never know the themes of my books until Scott Frank tells me." The film's success led Frank's agent at the time to say that he would be guaranteed ten years of steady work as a screenwriter. This was meant to be encouraging, but it filled Frank with dread. He was thirty-five. He and Jennifer had two young children, and another on the way. At night, he would walk the family dog around Pasadena, and upon reaching home he'd look at his family through the brightly lit windows and wonder, "What if I run out of ideas?" There was no reason to believe that creativity was a renewable resource. Writers burn out, fall out of fashion, become blocked. Frank was seized by a fear that he would "fail three or four times in a row," and be finished. Looking in at Jennifer and the children, he would think, "These people are in trouble!"

Most screenwriters grapple with the tension between art and commerce. Joan Didion, who wrote films such as "The Panic in Needle Park" and "A Star Is Born" with her husband, John Gregory Dunne, once suggested that "to understand whose picture it is one needs to look not particularly at the script but at the deal memo."

Frank is philosophical about the mercantile aspect of his profession. Early in his career, he got to know his hero, William Goldman, who became a mentor to Frank and other young screenwriters. Even Goldman lamented that half the scripts he'd written went unproduced. If you set out to make great art in Hollywood, Frank found, you frequently ended up in a purgatory of development. On a few occasions, he told me, he has declined to rewrite someone else's script, because he saw nothing he could improve—it was perfect. When I inquired about the titles of these films, he said, "Oh, they never got made." By contrast, some of his most creatively fulfilling experiences have come from money jobs. When Sher asked him to adapt "Out of

Sight," he was wary: he'd managed to write one Elmore Leonard movie without pissing off Elmore Leonard, and he wasn't eager to try his luck again. But his third child had been born, leading him to buy a bigger home, and he was still haunted by his agent's "ten years" prophecy. So he took the job. Soderbergh turned out to be an ideal match for Frank's sensibilities, preserving the wry, sexy vernacular of the script. As Chili muses in "Get Shorty," "Sometimes you do your best work when you got a gun to your head." The screenplay that Frank wrote to pay for his new house was nominated for an Academy Award.

After "Out of Sight," he was inundated by rewrite offers. Frank adheres to an informal code of discretion when it comes to this sort of work, but when I pressed him he said, "Ninety per cent of what I get called in on is character work." In "Saving Private Ryan," he helped round out such soldiers as the Scripture-quoting sniper, giving them active connections with people back home. In "The Ring," he developed the relationship between the protagonist, played by Naomi Watts, and her son. In "Gravity," his assignment was to give Sandra Bullock's character, an astronaut, "a life outside of space." In "Rise of the Planet of the Apes," he created the father character, played by John Lithgow, who forms a bond with a chimpanzee named Caesar and is cured of his Alzheimer's disease before regressing to an impaired mental state.

All the while, Frank deferred his own projects. This was a high-class problem, by any definition, but Craig Mazin, who has also done rewrites, explained the psychological effect: "There is something so vulnerable and frightening about doing your own thing, because it's your fault if it doesn't work. And then there's this other kind of work, where you're paid an extraordinary amount of money, you're the hero before you walk in the door, you're not even held that accountable, because you have a limited amount of time, and all you can do is make it better." Sometimes, an executive would tell Frank, "We have a script coming in a month from now, and we need you to rewrite it."

Frank stresses that these gigs allowed him to work with many directors he admired. He did a rewrite several years ago on a "Scarface" remake for Luca Guadagnino, which has since been abandoned. And his work on some films, such as "Minority Report," which was directed by Steven Spielberg, was so extensive that he received an official screenwriting credit. Nevertheless, it could sometimes seem as though Frank's many friends in the industry were taking advantage of his biddable nature. "Why are you saying yes to this?" Jennifer would ask after he'd accepted yet another assignment.

A prominent film producer told me, "For a long time, Scott Frank was the name people would bring up as a

cautionary tale about the dangers of the rewrite system. This was someone who could be the next William Goldman, but he kept doing these weekly rewrites instead of his own original work." When I asked Frank about that critique, he readily accepted it. "My career is probably best defined more as a failure of nerve than anything else," he told me. "I used to book myself up three years in advance, out of fear." Such anxiety can be a great motivator, but it can also amount to a life of safe choices.

By the time Frank reached his fifties, he was feeling a rising unease. There was no one eureka moment when he decided, like Flitcraft, to change his life. But, as Frank surveyed his career, he thought back to those childhood excursions in the Cessna with his father. For a good part of the past thirty years, he realized, he had just been "picking places to land."

One day last year, I visited the South of France, where Frank was directing a new limited series, "Monsieur Spade." It was early October, but it still felt like summer. At a remote farmhouse an hour north of Montpellier, I found Frank, in a baseball hat and sunglasses, preparing to shoot a scene with Clive Owen. The series is not an adaptation, but something like it: several years ago, Frank was informed that the rights to the Sam Spade character were available. Apart from "The Maltese Falcon," Spade appears in only a few Hammett stories, but Frank saw an opportunity to build a new tale around the famous detective. As it happened, he had been trying to obtain the rights to a different Dashiell Hammett property, "Red Harvest," which is one of Frank's favorite novels. (He likes to tell young writers that "Red Harvest" can teach them more about the velocity and economy of screenwriting than any manual.) So initially he demurred on the character rights. But then he had a thought: "I went, Wait, I know what this is about. It's about middle age." What if Spade was no longer a detective but an expat—in France? "He's living a quiet life. Tranquil," Frank told himself, warming to the idea. "And it's about to get very untranquil." He approached Tom Fontana, a veteran TV writer who created the HBO drama "Oz," about collaborating. Fontana told me, "Scott said, 'Sam Spade, twenty years after "The Maltese Falcon," living in the South of France.' I said, 'I'm in.'"

As French crew members adjusted lights around a storage shed where the scene would be shot, Frank conferred with Owen, who was dressed in suspenders and a high-waisted suit; the look was reminiscent of Humphrey Bogart, the quintessential Sam Spade (though Owen is about twice Bogart's height). Owen, a lifelong Hammett fan himself, expressed amusement to me that when the opportunity arose to play Spade it was in a series that would deconstruct the very macho iconography that made the character famous, and portray him as a man out of his element. The first scene Frank wrote finds Spade with his pants around his ankles, prone on an examination table, being given a prostate exam by a droll French physician who says that it's time to quit smoking. Chuckling over the humiliations Frank had visited upon his hero, Owen drawled, in his malty baritone, "I don't get the hat, I don't carry a gun, I don't smoke. I've got one word for this job—I've been duped!" He picked up a folding chair marked "CLIVE OWEN," relocated it to a spot in the shade, and sat down to study his script.

In the course of the past several years, Frank had experienced the kind of reinvention that his characters often undergo. Several changes transpired in close succession. After he and Jennifer moved to New York, he did "a ton" of therapy. He began taking Zoloft for anxiety, a move that he had resisted for a long time, because he felt that fear might be integral to his creative process. He wrote a novel, "Shaker," about a dissolute hit man whose plan to execute someone in L.A. is upended by an earthquake. The book, which Knopf published in 2015, didn't find a big audience, but writing it was cathartic. "Part of the exercise was getting all these other voices out of my head—all these people I liked collaborating with," Frank said. "I wanted to just write for myself." Perhaps most consequentially, he decided to stop doing rewrite jobs. "My identity for so long was defined by a lack of self-confidence in my own ideas," he told me. "Pleasing others seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to organize my art around. Until it wasn't."

It may have helped that Frank, like Spade, had woken up one day in a world that had changed. The movie business had become unrecognizable, with the studios essentially giving up on freestanding R-rated thrillers and dramas. Frank was forced to admit that most of the films he had built his reputation on would probably not get made today. Many talented screenwriters have opted to hold their noses and squander their gifts writing for superhero franchises. Frank wrote the X-Men movies "The Wolverine" and "Logan." But he was angry at himself for taking those jobs, and if you read the script for "Logan" you can tell. On page 2, he prefaces an action sequence with a warning to the reader: "If you're on the make for a hyper choreographed, gravity defying, city-block destroying, CG fuckathon, this ain't your movie. In this

"Interesting. I don't remember that part of the book I listened to at 2x speed while doing other things."

flick, people will get hurt or killed when shit falls on them. . . . Should anyone in our story have the misfortune to fall off a roof or out a window, they won't bounce. They will die."

The script, which Frank wrote with the film's director, James Mangold, rejected so many tenets of the genre that it turned out to be quite interesting; part noir, part Western, it was "Shane" with retractable claws. Frank received his second Oscar nomination for the screenplay. "If Scott wanted to write those movies, he could write them all day long," Stacey Sher remarked. "He made 'Logan' singular. He got nominated for a fucking Oscar for it. What's distinctive about Scott is that he never did it again." By the time "Logan" came out, in 2017, Frank had discovered a new medium in which the stories he actually wanted to tell could still get made: streaming.

For the past two decades, Frank has worked with a researcher named Mimi Munson, who lives in Maine. Inspired by Francis Ford Coppola and Elmore Leonard, both of whom employed full-time researchers, Frank hired Munson to help him explore broad areas that he might want to write about, or to answer highly specific queries on deadline. Munson told me, "He'll say, 'I have a soldier and he needs to be very sick. But it can't be an illness that'll definitely kill him—it has to be something that *might* kill him. And it has to have a psychological component, so people might doubt he is compos mentis. And it has to go away. And I need it in forty-five minutes.'"

Frank, who loves Westerns, had long wanted to write one, and when Munson was visiting New York she discovered, at the Strand bookstore, numerous published diaries of women from the Wild West. An idea took root, and Frank wrote a movie script, called "Godless," about a town in New Mexico where a mining accident has killed most of the men. People loved the screenplay. It was violent but soulful, and filled with those moments of narrative subversion that Frank enjoys: the inhabitants of a remote ranch brace for an attack when they see a figure approaching, only to discover that it is a mother seeking help for her sick baby; a callow deputy sheriff twirls his pistols and talks a suspiciously big game, then turns out to be an excellent shot. But it was a sprawling, ambitious story that tracked a dozen intersecting characters, with no connection to a comic book or a line of toys—precisely the sort of movie that Hollywood now avoided. The idea was rejected all over town. Frank finally ended up at Netflix, which offered him the broader canvas of six episodes. (During production, he was allowed to add a seventh.) The show appeared in 2017 to strong reviews, and helped establish the "limited series" as a streaming staple.

One curious feature of Hollywood sociology is that people who write movies may be wretched, powerless, and replaceable, but in television the writer is king. Frank wrote all the episodes of "Godless," and as the showrunner he enjoyed a level of creative authority that a writer seldom does on a film set. He also directed every episode.

For about a decade, Frank had been developing into something like an auteur. As a young screenwriter, he had talked about directing but had insisted that it was not the right time. He took comfort in the predictable domesticity of a writer's life, and worried that becoming a director, which can mean long stretches away from home, might put a strain on his family. Like the characters he writes, Frank occasionally says one thing when he means another. Jennifer decided that he was using his family as a pretext. "He kept saying, 'I can't direct because of the kids,'" she told me. "And I said, 'Don't hide behind the kids.'"

When Frank was in his thirties, he had written a thriller, "The Lookout," about a former high-school hockey star who suffers a traumatic brain injury and is coöpted by a gang of local crooks into assisting in a heist. Some prominent directors considered making the movie—Sam Mendes, David Fincher, Michael Mann—but none did. Finally, in 2005, Frank decided to make it himself. He shot it in Manitoba, with Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Jeff Daniels. The finished film is moody and effective, but Frank was forced to admit that his level of mastery as a director lagged considerably behind his abilities as a writer. After Soderbergh saw the film, they had what Soderbergh described to me as a "very blunt" conversation: "I said, 'Look, you are a writer who has directed now, but you are not yet a director. You documented what you wrote. But that's not the same as being a director.'"

When I asked Frank about this, he confirmed that Soderbergh had said those things—and also that, for some time after that conversation, they didn't speak. Frank, still sounding a bit wounded, pointed out to me that the movie won an Independent Spirit Award for Best First Feature. But Soderbergh said that he loved Frank too much to offer disingenuous enthusiasm, and that he wouldn't have said what he did if he hadn't thought that Frank could ultimately "get there," and find a distinctive directorial voice.

After such an appraisal, it must have been tempting for Frank to retreat to what he knew he was good at. Instead, he directed a second film: a grisly detective story, based on a book by Lawrence Block, called "A Walk Among the Tombstones." While he was working on the film, in 2012, he experienced a crisis of confidence: the movie didn't cohere. Panicked and stuck, Frank stifled his pride and went to Soderbergh for advice.

They had not been entirely out of touch. When Soderbergh was editing his 2011 film "Contagion," he had asked for feedback, and Frank had offered his own blunt assessment. "He watched the movie and said, 'You've got huge problems. I don't even know where to start,'" Soderbergh recalled. Frank's bruising suggestion was that they reassess the narrative and make a ninety-minute version, effectively shaving forty-five minutes from the film—which Soderbergh proceeded to do. "The fact that he was right, coupled with the fact that he got to be tough on me, was probably a necessary and helpful step in our reconnecting," he said.

Soderbergh, who has made nearly forty films, possesses the sort of diagnostic acumen when it comes to directing and editing that Frank does with a screenplay. After watching Frank's cut of "A Walk Among the Tombstones," he said, "You've edited it very insecurely." Frank had aspired to make a seventies-style thriller, in the fashion of Alan J. Pakula. But he'd hedged his bets by compiling multiple alternative versions for every sequence. The result looked "as if every

scene was a different movie," Frank says now. Soderbergh offered to clear his schedule and recut the movie with him. Scene by scene, they excavated the film that Frank had originally intended to make. It took three weeks, and it was during that time, Frank told me, that he "really learned how to be a director."

On set in France, Frank seemed amiably frazzled. Whereas he tends to prefer neurotic overpreparation, his French crew favored a more spontaneous approach. "They don't *prep*," he whispered. "It's terrifying. They're super casual." Clive Owen told me that, because Frank had written all the episodes with Fontana and knew precisely what he wanted from each scene, "he doesn't do many takes." He likes to move quickly, so as not to dissipate the actors' energy or fall behind schedule. For the actors, Owen said, it means that "you have to come ready to work."

While the crew adjusted the lighting for a new shot, Frank mused on his role as writer-director. "The hardest part about the job is learning to live with disappointment," he explained. There's never the budget to shoot the scene exactly as you'd imagined it, or the weather isn't coöperating, or you couldn't book the perfect location, or an actor can't nail the tone. "You have this thing in your head, and *you* can't do it," he went on. "You see your vision leaking away." And yet you can't blame the result on anyone else. Directing, he concluded, is "the loneliest job in the world."

Yet he told me all this with a smile, as if he were deriving some madcap joy from the process. The trick, he went on, was to find a way to embrace the uncertainty and to recognize that the thing you shoot will be different from the thing you wrote—and often better, in unexpected ways.

The cinematographer Steven Meizler, who shot both "Godless" and "The Queen's Gambit" and has also worked with Spielberg, Soderbergh, and Fincher, told me, "A lot of great directors, they're out of reach. There's a persona when they get on set." But Frank directs without the armor of such a mystique. It takes a certain confidence to be open to the ideas, and even to the criticism, of the people around you, Meizler said, and to be candid about your own uncertainty. "Scott's shield is that he doesn't have one," he remarked.

It was after the editing master class with Soderbergh that Frank came into his own as a director, with "Godless." The series was a success, so Netflix agreed to make "The Queen's Gambit." As one of the show's producers, William Horberg, pointed out to me, the story did not seem particularly commercial: "Girl? Chess? Fifties? Orphan? Drugs? Pass." Several notable filmmakers had tried and failed to turn the novel into a feature film, including Bernardo Bertolucci and the actor Heath Ledger, who, before his death, in 2008, had planned to make "The Queen's Gambit" his directorial début. The problem with doing it as a feature, Frank decided, was that at that length it would inevitably turn into a "Karate Kid"-style sports movie. He was less interested in whether the protagonist, Beth Harmon, would win the big tournament than he was in a theme that he had first explored in "Little Man Tate," and had grappled with in his own life: the hazards of mastery, the costs of brilliance. As he had with "Godless," Frank secured a green light from Netflix before he wrote all the scripts—a risky move for the company, generally speaking, though the suits presumably took comfort in knowing that if they ran into trouble they could always call Scott Frank.

The series was shot in Berlin, because Frank was determined to work with the German production designer Uli Hanisch, having admired his work on the series "Babylon Berlin." Beth Harmon was played, with eerie poise, by Anya Taylor-Joy. Whereas "Godless" features wide shots of people in vast landscapes, much of "The Queen's Gambit" plays out in closeups of Taylor-Joy, because so much of the drama takes place inside her head. When Soderbergh saw Frank's first rough assembly, he said, "This is going to be huge." Released in October, 2020, at the height of the pandemic, "The Queen's Gambit" was watched by sixty-two million Netflix subscribers in its first month of streaming, becoming the service's No. 1 show in sixty-three countries. The series triggered an international boom in the sale of chess sets. Netflix even introduced its own "Queen's Gambit" board game. ("It's . . . not chess, which I wasn't expecting," Rebecca Root, who plays a choir teacher in the series, told me dryly.) The show was nominated for eighteen Emmys and won eleven; Frank got one for directing, and was nominated for writing.

This triumph was marred, slightly, on Emmy night, when Frank went up to accept his directing award—in a tux, his curly hair carefully combed—and brought with him a two-page speech, with a long list of people to thank. He was nervous, and running long, when the band struck up to play him off. "Really?" he said, with a dismissive wave of his hand, plowing on. "Um, I'm also grateful to this incredible array of actors, none of whom really need much help from me and all of whom—seriously, stop the music." To people who know Frank, this moment, though clumsily expressed, illustrated his humility—his desire to showcase collaborators. Nevertheless, for a man who is so adept at writing concise, elegant speeches for fictional characters, it was a puzzling lapse, on a very big stage. Twitter went berserk. "The 2021 Emmys Featured the Worst Acceptance Speech in History," the *Independent* declared. Months later, Sterlin Harjo, the cocreator of the show "Reservation Dogs," delivered an acceptance speech at the Gotham Awards in which he took a jab at "the chess-player show, or whatever that was," exclaiming, "Don't fucking talk so long!"

Over lunch one day in New York, I spoke with Tony Gilroy about how difficult it can be to remain relevant as a screenwriter as you age. When he and Frank were young, Gilroy pointed out, they were "surrogate sons" to older, accomplished figures such as Goldman and the director Sydney Pollack, and they absorbed a great deal of wisdom from those relationships. (They no doubt benefitted as well from the fact that Hollywood was then such a boys' club.) But Frank and Gilroy also watched their mentors lose their touch. Goldman "hated to revise," Gilroy said, and it is all too easy to let your prowess and your ego seduce you into believing that your first instinct is always right. Both Frank and Gilroy offered counsel on Pollack's troubled final film, "The Interpreter." After decades of success making such movies as "Three Days of the Condor" and "Out of Africa," Pollack had "a way of working," Frank said. "And it stopped working." Suddenly, Pollack was out of step.

Frank urged him to do "something different, something small, something that's not a love story where they end up together." He even tried to get Pollack to direct his thriller "The Lookout." But Pollack couldn't change. To Frank, the lesson was clear: you can't "just double down on what you used to do." The only way to remain vital is to take chances.

On a bright Saturday morning this past spring, I met Frank at a theatre in Hell's Kitchen, where he was rehearsing a new project, an opera set to the music of the Killers. The concept was for Frank to stitch songs by the band into a fictional Cain-and-Abel story about the founding of a Las Vegas-like city, called "Dustland": a film with musical numbers. "I'm trying to do something based on Brecht's 'City of Mahagonny,'" he told me excitedly. "I'm listening to the Killers' songs over and over. But the bastards just released a new album, so now I'll have to reconfigure it." He had spent the past week workshopping with the band's front man, Brandon Flowers, and Thomas Kail, the director of "Hamilton," along with a pickup team of accomplished Broadway vocalists whom Kail had assembled. As a small audience of friends and family sat down to watch, Kail said, "This is really about just experiencing this music in sequence. We're not going to tell you the story right now." He sat next to Frank and Flowers at a folding table in a corner of the stage while a pianist played the pretty descending riff from the song "Enterlude," and the performers, assembled in a semicircle, sang, "We hope you enjoy your stay / It's good to have you with us, even if it's just for the day."

While I was working on this article, Frank periodically sent me an updated version of a document titled "My Stuff"—an ever-evolving list of twenty or so active projects. Some are films that he is producing, as a way of mentoring younger writers. Since the nineties, he has been an adviser to the Sundance Screenwriters Lab, and in that capacity he has worked with many filmmakers who have gone on to substantial careers. Among them are Marielle Heller, who directed "Diary of a Teenage Girl" and "Can You Ever Forgive Me?"—and whom Frank cast as Beth Harmon's mother in "The Queen's Gambit"—and Charlotte Wells, who directed the recent film "Aftersun." In 1993, when Paul Thomas Anderson was writing his first feature, "Hard Eight," he attended the lab. "Stop watching movies and start reading," Frank told him, recommending a list of books, including "Red Harvest." It was "the best advice I could have gotten," Anderson told me.

Even after the global success of "The Queen's Gambit," Netflix passed on Frank's next three projects. One was an adaptation of "Laughter in the Dark," the 1938 novel by Vladimir Nabokov. Frank is co-writing the script with the novelist and screenwriter Megan Abbott. The material is tricky; the novel, often described as a precursor to "Lolita," tells the story of a middle-aged art critic who becomes infatuated with a seventeen-year-old girl. Frank wanted to do it as a film noir, and Abbott, who was an academic before she turned to popular writing, is an authority on women in noir. "We talked about the femme fatale as this character who gets short shrift," Abbott told me. "But really great noir is always toying with that. Scott wanted the female point of view to be foregrounded." If they can get the movie made, Anya Taylor-Joy is slated to play the femme fatale.

"Monsieur Spade" will begin airing on AMC in January. By the time that happens, Frank will be in Scotland, directing a project that Netflix *did* go for: "Department Q," a series based on crime novels by the Danish author Jussi Adler-Olsen. Frank is also working on a follow-up to his novel, "Shaker," this one called "Faker." The story is centered on a crooked Hollywood money manager. "A sequel to the novel nobody read," he said. "That's how I roll. Giving the people what they don't want." He has also, after decades of trying, finally secured the rights to "Red Harvest"; he and Abbott will write a script for A24.

When the band had run through eight or nine Killers songs, the audience applauded. Frank climbed down from the stage. "It's fun, right?" he said, grinning. "It's so different." He seemed exhilarated. He has never written an opera, or anything like it, he acknowledged, and that was a little scary. "I literally Googled 'How do you write a libretto?'" he said. "It feels good to not know what I'm doing." ♦

"Can you remember the general shape of our car?"

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THE CONTROL OF NATURE

THE CATS OF L.A.

The "No Kill" movement helps keep cats outdoors. The consequences belie the name.

BY JONATHAN FRANZEN

This past June, at the height of kitten season in Los Angeles, Gail Raff got a call for help from the neighborhood of Valley Glen, where a young woman had trapped a cat that needed fixing. Although the City of Los Angeles subsidizes the sterilization of unowned cats, appointments at clinics are hard to come by, and Raff was known in the animal-rescue world as a trapper who secures as many appointments as she can. Arriving in Valley Glen, she learned that the young woman, alarmed by the number of cats in her neighborhood, had been doing her best to feed them. Now they were having babies all over the place, and she wanted to do the socially responsible thing. She gave Raff the address of a "problem" house, not far from hers, where the cats were concentrated. Raff promised to come back and start trapping as soon as she got more appointments.

A month later, on a warm evening in the San Fernando Valley, I joined Raff on a mission to the problem house. With us was Orly Kroh, a good friend of Raff's for more than forty years, who is also a trapper. Both women are outgoing and glowingly complected, in the Southern California way, and both were wearing black. In gathering dusk, Raff took two cage traps from the back of her Mazda CX-7, covered their floors with newsprint, which protects a desperate cat from injuring its claws, and baited them with chunks of sardine.

Valley Glen is a neighborhood of single-family houses and tree-lined streets, notable for its large immigrant population. The problem house, which stood at the corner of a block with a cheerful plenitude of parked cars, had a lonely and embattled look. Every shade and curtain was drawn, nothing stirring inside. Raff assured me that, despite appearances, the owners were home. The first time she'd trapped here, three weeks earlier, a frail old couple had emerged from the house speaking Farsi and summoned a bilingual friend, who conveyed to Raff their enthusiastic approval of her trapping. The couple had been feeding the cats, thereby drawing further cats to their yard, and they didn't know anything about getting them fixed.

Leaving one trap by the curb, Raff carried the other one up the house's driveway and placed it near a dirty, half-empty swimming pool. She was seeing things I couldn't see—cats on the back wall of the yard, cats in transit from the house of the socially responsible young woman. Then I saw a cat myself, spectral in the dusk. It was entering the trap.

"I think I may have one," Raff called to Kroh.

The cat made a deft U-turn, scampered out of the trap, and vanished. We joined Kroh in the street, where she was watching another cat. Its wariness visibly warring with the lure of sardine, it crept into the second trap. When the door fell shut behind it, Raff hastened over to check its ears. Every street cat that's taken to a clinic has the tip of one ear clipped off, to mark it as fixed.

"No ear tip," Raff said.

The cat was silent in the cage, sporadically thrashing.

"Put your finger in there, Gail," Kroh said. "See how friendly she is."

In contrast with truly feral cats, which shun close human contact, cats that have run away or have been abandoned after losing their fear of people are known as friendlies. This particular cat was not a friendly. Raff draped a beach towel over the cage, and Kroh secured the door with zip ties.

Behind the house, more cats had arrived. One of them nosed around the trap and tentatively entered it. After a moment of suspense, the door fell shut, and Raff relaxed. "Usually it's not this easy," she said.

She had a third trap in her Mazda, and she wanted to use all three of the appointments she'd made for the following morning. Most of her cats go to a nonprofit clinic near the Burbank airport, FixNation, which performs more than forty per cent of city-sponsored surgeries. Raff used to get Saturday appointments every week, but the demands on FixNation are so great that she can now get them only once or twice a month.

Behind the house, while Raff set the trap, Kroh heard something inaudible to me: the cries of newborn kittens. She groped around in a bank of dense bushes and then, finding nothing, played the sound of a mother cat on her phone. She and Raff were reminding me of birders, who see and hear things that unpracticed people don't, and who sometimes resort to using playback. As a birder, I was interested in cats because they kill staggering numbers of birds in the United States. But I also had sympathy for the animals we were trapping. The cats were skittish and hungry, endearing. It wasn't their fault that they were on the street.

Kroh had extended her search to the far side of the problem house. "I found a baby," she reported, "and I found the feral mom, she's in the bushes. I think she just rejected this one."

From the sidewalk, we watched a tiny black kitten teeter on the edge of a window well. Before it could fall in, Kroh scooped it up and placed a call to a group that she and Raff trusted, Kitten Rescue. All around us, feline shapes were flitting along fences and pausing in the street. "There's like a hundred cats here," Kroh said, cradling the kitten. "There's two cats right there, spraying the house, spraying away."

No one knows how many cats live outdoors in Los Angeles. The city's Animal Services Web site offers a mysteriously precise estimate of nine hundred and sixty thousand; other sources put the number as low as three hundred and

The animal-control system, overwhelmed by demand, leaves animals vulnerable to abandonment, death, and disease.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANTOINE MAILLARD

fifty thousand and as high as three million. "It's getting worse and worse," Raff had told me. "There used to be a kitten season, and now it's kitten season 24/7." Cats are impressive reproducers—females can become pregnant at the age of four months and can have more than one litter in a year—and a warming climate seems to have increased their fertility. In addition to the cats dumped on the street by renters whose new landlords forbid pets, and by the children of deceased cat owners, large numbers are said to have been abandoned by people who acquired them during the pandemic or whose budgets are now pinched by inflation. Los Angeles is also a city of immigrants, many of whom come from cultures in which cats are a casual outdoor presence, belonging to no one, and sterilization isn't widely practiced.

While we waited for Kitten Rescue, two women with similar short haircuts approached us suspiciously. Learning that we were there for cats, they immediately warmed. "That's amazing that you're doing that," one of them said. "There are so many cats that need homes." When Raff explained that, rather than finding homes, she'd be returning the cats after they'd been fixed, the women declared that this, too, was amazing.

To be finished for the night, Raff needed to catch one more cat, but the sardines were now eliciting little curiosity. The rejected kitten had gone still in the towel in which Kroh had wrapped it. "Are you alive?" she asked it.

"This is why we do this," Raff said to me. "Because the babies have babies."

Unexpectedly, the front door of the problem house opened, and a small old man leaned out. "How many?" he said.

"Two," Raff called.

"How many."

"Two! Two!" we all said.

The man spoke over his shoulder, presumably in Farsi, and turned back to us. "Thank you very much. Thank you."

After the door had closed, Raff remarked, "I think he thinks I'm not returning them. I don't ask questions—I just get them fixed."

In municipalities throughout the United States, a policy of trap-neuter-return (T.N.R.) has become the preferred approach to the problem of unowned cats. The hope is that, if enough cats are fixed before they can reproduce, the population will gradually dwindle. But few, if any, municipalities have the resources to engage in T.N.R. themselves. Instead, they may revise laws forbidding the abandonment of animals ("return" could be considered a form of abandonment) and leave the hands-on work to cat-welfare groups, and to freelance volunteers like Raff and Kroh.

To freelance like this means staying out late to trap, keeping the captured cats overnight, delivering them to a clinic in the morning, picking them up in the afternoon, housing them for a second night, and then returning them to where they were trapped. Raff, who works in member services for an H.M.O., and Kroh, who had a long career in management with Panasonic, devote much of their free time to the endeavor. Even at clinics that accept city money for sterilizations, volunteers are obliged to pay for the antibiotics the animals might need, and most clinics charge them for vaccines as well. Earlier, Raff had told me that she has three companion cats, her "roommates," which live indoors with her. "We're not crazy cat people," she said. "I just want the overpopulation to stop. Cats don't deserve to be outside. They're getting killed—Orly and I drive around and look in the gutters. I don't want to put them back on the street, but there is no other option."

The kitten rescuer, Christine Hernandez, arrived in a four-door sedan and apologized for not coming sooner. She took the kitten from Kroh and kissed its head, whose shape recalled E.T. She agreed that the cat situation was dire, and she laughed about the feral cats in her own yard, which, she said, wanted only "human level" food; they wouldn't touch Whiskas. After snapping some pictures, soon to be posted on Instagram, she departed in a chorus of thanks.

There ensued a long vigil. The two occupied traps, draped with towels, were silent. All across the city, more kittens were being born. Raff's days begin before six in the morning, but she hates to quit before she's filled her quota. "It's luck, not science," she said. "Some places, we have to go three times—the cats are too smart. They'll sit outside the trap and just look at it."

Close by us, a cat in heat let out a yowl. Another sat for a long while by the trap, just looking at it. Toward eleven o'clock, a curtain stirred in the problem house. We were still being observed.

"Let's give it five more minutes," Kroh said.

"You guys can go," Raff said. "I'll sit in my car and watch."

"She'll get that third one," Kroh assured me.

"It's very addicting," Raff allowed.

"Trapping is actually really fun," Kroh said. "When I come home, my husband's always, like, 'How many did you get?'"

When I come home from birding, my partner asks me much the same question. With a feeling of defeat, I got in my car and drove back to my hotel. There I found that Raff had texted me a photo, time-stamped 11:35 P.M., of a short-haired cat in her last trap. "Ear tipped!!" she'd written, in frustration. "I'm done."

Both cat-specific advocacy groups, such as Alley Cat Allies, and national animal-welfare heavyweights, such as Best Friends Animal Society, maintain that trap-neuter-return is the only approach that's been proved to be effective in addressing the problem of outdoor cats. Whether this is true depends on the effect you're looking for. If the aim is to keep feral cats out of city shelters, then the "return" part of T.N.R. is, by definition, effective. If the aim is to quiet public complaints about yowling and spraying, the "neuter" part can be locally effective. If the aim is to protect more cats against certain diseases, the "trap" part can be coupled with mandatory vaccination. But the City of Los Angeles, like most places that adopt T.N.R., promises more than that. A stated objective of its Citywide Cat Program is to reduce the number of street cats, through T.N.R., while leaving them in their "natural outdoor home."

When I spoke to the general manager of Los Angeles Animal Services, Staycee Dains, at one of the city's six shelter facilities, she was frank in her

assessment of this objective. "There's a lot of evidence that T.N.R. is not effective at reducing the cat population over all," Dains said. She added that T.N.R. *is* effective in preventing individual cats from breeding. "It's better than nothing."

When T.N.R. is done well, as Gail Raff and Orly Kroh do it—getting to know a particular cat colony, revisiting it until every adult cat has been trapped and fixed, and continuing to monitor it for new arrivals—individual cats will benefit, and the colony population may stabilize. At the most local of levels, Raff and Kroh are making a difference that's meaningful to them. At a larger scale, however, the math doesn't work. Because cats multiply so quickly, at least seventy per cent of a population needs to be sterilized before the numbers will plateau. Even if Los Angeles could sponsor hundreds of thousands of surgeries in a short span of time, it would be impossible to quickly trap three-quarters of a population so vast and fluid and furtive. As long as the streets are considered cats' natural outdoor home, there will also be further abandonment of house cats by people unwilling or unable to take responsibility for them.

The handful of studies reporting success with T.N.R. have been seriously flawed in one or more ways. The methodology for keeping track of cats was porous, or the cats were confined to a strictly patrolled location, such as a university campus, or the population reduction was achieved by removing lots of cats for adoption. One of the best-known demonstrations of T.N.R., at the Ocean Reef Club, in Key Largo, Florida, has been running since 1995. The project sharply reduced the number of cats on the property, but, despite being in a gated community, and despite continuous neutering and adoption, a sizable breeding population stubbornly persists.

The embrace of a strategy with no firm basis in science, in city after city, has coincided with the rise of a movement known as No Kill. Fifty years ago, American animal-control facilities euthanized perhaps a million cats and dogs a month for population management. By the early two-thousands, that number had fallen dramatically, owing largely to public awareness of the importance of having one's pet fixed. The No Kill movement, which came to be led by Best Friends Animal Society, sought to bring the number down to zero. (No Kill doesn't mean no euthanasia; to allow for untreatably sick or aggressive animals, Best Friends deems a shelter to be No Kill if it releases, alive, at least ninety per cent of the animals it takes in.) Having worked to reform shelters in Utah, its home state, Best Friends set its sights on Los Angeles, where a persistently high kill rate had made city officials the target of protests and property crimes. Best Friends launched a vigorous advertising campaign and organized a coalition of animal-rescue groups to work with L.A. Animal Services, which was perennially under-resourced. By increasing its private partnerships, Animal Services could off-load more rescue and adoption work, thereby raising its live-release rate and saving money.

By the time Best Friends began these efforts, in 2010, Animal Services was developing a new program for feral cats: rather than accepting them at shelters, the city would promote T.N.R. Under state law, the policy would require environmental review, and the city had promised to comply. When it failed to do so, it was sued by the Urban Wildlands Group, whose science director, Travis Longcore, an urban ecologist, was deeply skeptical of T.N.R. (One of the co-plaintiffs was the American Bird Conservancy, with which I have a long association.) The plaintiffs argued that the new policy, by allowing more cats to remain on the street, without stemming population growth, would lead to further predatory pressure on local wildlife.

Longcore also feared that the policy would leave city residents with no defense against nuisance animals. Over the years, as feral cats had become ubiquitous in much of L.A., the city had received countless applications for permits to trap them and remove them. Some of the applicants reported grievously sick or injured cats:

> A tabby with a huge tumor-like growth on its side. 2 sway-backed, deformed looking cats.

> Feral cats in area have some type of skin disease causing lesions. . . . Also one of the feral kittens is in desperate need of medical attention. Approx 2" of colon is protruding from anus.

Many more of the applicants were literally beleaguered:

> A rogue feral cat is wreaking havoc & hurting our cats. One of our cats was hurt so badly last week, she had to be euthanized.

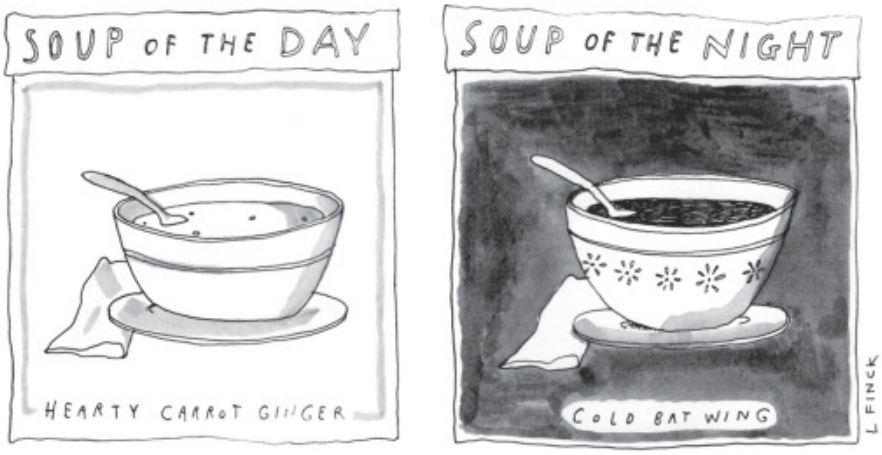
> They find ways to get into our crawl space & urinate everywhere, which affects our breathing.

> The cats also kill the birds in my yard and leave the partially eaten bird bodies laying around.

> Feral cats (between 7 & 10) have torn our patio furniture cushions (just spent $500 to order replacements). . . . A feral cat was observed vomiting on our lawn. I have small grandchildren that play in the yard and consider the situation a health hazard.

> They fight and cry outside our window at night and have been killing squirrels to eat. Recently I found a squirrel with its limbs torn off and guts hanging out in my back yard. The cats are also using my flower beds as a litter box.

A city resident who trapped a cat was obliged to surrender it to Animal Services, which, in the past, if the cat wasn't a friendly, had had little choice



but to euthanize it. The city's new cat policy was specifically developed to change this. Its key objective was to reduce the city's kill numbers.

In their lawsuit, the plaintiffs presented evidence that Animal Services, without performing the requisite environmental review, had been promoting T.N.R. and had made it increasingly difficult to obtain nuisance-trapping permits. In 2010, the relevant judge issued a permanent injunction, ordering the city to revert to its earlier policy. The injunction earned Longcore the enduring enmity of local cat advocates. (Gail Raff is still angry at him: "Why would a person who cares about wildlife not want me to do T.N.R.?") Longcore, when I met him on the campus of U.C.L.A., where he is a professor, told me that the injunction never prohibited volunteer T.N.R. efforts, and that he didn't care if the city wanted to "waste" money to support them. His objection had been to a policy with no alternatives. "People couldn't believe that their rights had been hollowed out by zealots," he said. "The city's policy would result in a preschool having no recourse if children were playing in a place full of fleas and cat feces. That's what the city wanted, and the lawsuit was about proving it was what they wanted."

To comply with the injunction, the city eventually commissioned a formal environmental-impact report. The draft report, released in 2019, included a mathematical model of T.N.R.'s long-term effect on the city's unowned-cat population. It predicted that, if the city achieved a goal of twenty thousand additional sterilizations each year, the population would decline by thirteen per cent in thirty years. Given the many imponderables in a thirty-year time horizon, it's hard to place full faith in the model's predictions. For the purposes of environmental review, however, all that mattered was that the model not predict a population increase. In December, 2020, the city council approved a cat program much like the one that had been proposed more than a decade earlier. The most significant difference was that it explicitly preserved the right to remove nuisance cats.

A few months after the council vote, Best Friends and L.A. Animal Services announced that its shelters had attained No Kill status in 2020, with a live-release rate of just over ninety per cent. Best Friends, which is campaigning to achieve No Kill at every shelter in the country by 2025, declared a major victory in Los Angeles and shifted its focus to other cities. But the declaration was premature. The city's live-release rate has since fallen to about eighty-five per cent. Its cat program, an outgrowth of No Kill, is also struggling. Although L.A. Animal Services maintains that the program's goals will be achieved in the near future, its published statistics indicate that only about ten thousand Citywide Cat Program vouchers will be redeemed this year—well short of the twenty thousand surgeries that the environmental review assumed. The city lists twenty clinics that accept the vouchers, but when I called them I learned that eight of them did not accept the vouchers, did not have appointments available, or did not respond to multiple messages. Even if T.N.R. were effective in reducing populations, it isn't clear that the Citywide Cat Program can hit its target number.

Gail Raff blames Animal Services and the city's lawyers, for not resolving the legal conflict sooner, and also Best Friends, for chasing donors and headlines while failing to fund T.N.R. "They're just dollar signs," she said. "They created this mess. How do you get to No Kill without spay and neuter?"

Raff isn't alone in her disenchantment with No Kill. To maintain a low kill rate, shelters in many cities have resorted to warehousing animals under inhumane conditions, and have deflected unadoptable animals to open-admission shelters and let them do the dirty work of killing, the stigma of which can lead to harassment and low worker retention. Increasingly, city shelters simply refuse to accept certain animals, referring citizens instead to private groups. (This is the situation in Los Angeles, where rescue and fostering groups report being overwhelmed with cats and kittens.) A long-serving animal-control officer, who asked not to be identified, described to me a system intensely pressured by No Kill to keep animals moving through it—dangerous dogs and frightened feral cats being placed with unsuspecting adopters, abusive or psychologically disturbed people being given animals without even a basic background check, because there aren't enough good homes for all the animals. "No Kill sounds great," the officer said. "But it's a myth."

In recent years, to soften the image of street cats, their advocates have popularized the term "community cats." (The word "feral," besides having a horror-movie ring to it, excludes the friendlies that are often found in cat colonies.) The new term could be taken to imply that outdoor cats are cherished members of human communities. Since, however, the cats are cherished mainly by the people who feed them, the term may be better understood as a message *to* communities: Love them or hate them, these cats are here to stay. Staycee Dains, who developed a community-cat program in San Jose before becoming the head of L.A. Animal Services, suggested to me that citizens simply need to accept the presence of outdoor cats. "If cats are healthy and safe in a neighborhood," she said, "why should they be denied this just because a person doesn't like cats?"

How healthy and safe the cats are is a matter of dispute. The position of Best Friends—that "community cats thrive outdoors"—echoes that of many cat-specific advocacy groups. But the groups' own fund-raising appeals, such as this one from Alley Cat Allies, paint a different picture:

> Maeve had no teeth and couldn't eat properly. She was weak, starving, and suffering from a respiratory condition. Maeve was also feral—completely unsocialized—and very afraid. *But with support from people like you, we were able to trap her and give her the second chance she so urgently needed.*

Although it's generally agreed that outdoor-kitten mortality is high, it's difficult to find a broad quantitative study of adult longevity. Well-fed cats in a mild climate undoubtedly fare better, especially if they've been fixed and have received some vaccinations, but they typically have a higher risk of communicable diseases, such as mange and feline immunodeficiency virus, than indoor cats. Large numbers of free-roaming cats are also killed or maimed by vehicles, by predators, by poisoning, and, presumably, by exposure to harsh weather. The American Veterinary Medical

Association advises that their life expectancy is "radically reduced" by living outdoors.

The risks to humans are also consequential. Flea-borne typhus has been steeply on the rise in Los Angeles, and cat fleas were a suspected vector in one of several typhus deaths reported in the city in 2022. A more widespread threat is toxoplasmosis, which is caused by a parasite that cannot reproduce without cats, is transmitted through their feces, and may result in miscarriages and birth defects when pregnant women are exposed to it. (In a marvel of parasite evolution, rodents infected with toxoplasmosis can lose their fear of predators, not least cats, apparently owing to changes in their brain chemistry. Some studies have shown an association between the parasite and mental illnesses in humans, including schizophrenia.) Rabies is relatively rare in cats, but more cats than dogs are infected with it, and they represent a significant source of human exposure. And then there are the coyotes.

In July, in response to citizens' complaints about the menace to their pets, the Pasadena city council invited the public to a discussion of lethal control of coyotes. Like its neighbor Los Angeles, Pasadena has many of them. Although coyotes have been amply demonstrated to be ineradicable, one councilman, Steve Madison, spoke passionately about the need to protect the city's cats and dogs from their attacks. "These pets enrich our lives," he said. "They're like family members." The rest of the council, along with most of the public commenters, was squarely against lethal control. One commenter held up a picture of overflowing Pasadena trash cans and said, "We're basically inviting the coyotes for dinner." Another, Lisa Lange, observed that outdoor-cat feeding stations are notorious attractors of coyotes, which come to eat the cat food, stay to eat the cats, and thereby become dangerously habituated to contact with humans. (A forthcoming study in *Human-Wildlife Interactions* reports finding cats in more than a third of coyote stomachs with identifiable contents.) The refrain of the discussion was that, if residents didn't want coyotes harming family members, they should keep their toddlers close, their dogs on a short leash, and their cats indoors. After listening to more than thirty comments, the council voted unanimously against lethal control.

"I'm sorry to trouble you yet again with Internet issues."

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Lisa Lange is a senior vice-president of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Last year, when I recorded a short video for PETA, urging people to keep their cats indoors, I'd been surprised to learn that the group opposes both No Kill policies and trap-neuter-return. "We're opposed to outdoor cats, period," Lange told me, at her home in Pasadena. "T.N.R. isn't 'better than nothing'—it's worse than nothing. It doesn't reduce the number of homeless cats, but it does normalize the idea that cats should be outdoors, and it turns a blind eye to their suffering. We see it every day in the diseased faces and broken bodies of feral cats. There is a fate worse than death."

To be outdoors, watching birds, is to be at home with death. Every spring, outside my back door, in Northern California, I count twelve or fourteen little fluff balls dashing after their quail parents; by midsummer, only half a dozen adolescent chicks remain, and by September, when the quail retreat into the underbrush, there are only two or three. In the United States alone, the annual death toll of birds is probably upward of fifteen billion. Their base population is on the order of seven billion, but these seven billion birds breed prolifically, in many cases raising more than one brood in a season. A conservative guess would be that, on average, every summer, each mature bird brings two young birds into the world. Since the population returns to its base level by the start of the next breeding season, this would suggest that, in the course of a year, at least two-thirds of all American birds do not survive.

In the past fifty years, their base population has fallen by thirty per cent, from an estimated ten billion in 1970. Habitat loss and degradation account for much of the decline, but, because the remaining habitat could still support a larger population, an increase in modern threats is also implicated. The greatest of these threats are collisions with obstacles, especially windows; powerful classes of pesticide, such as neonicotinoids; and a non-native predatory species, cats.

A paper published in 2013 in *Nature Communications,* an offshoot of the

journal *Nature*, estimated that cats kill between a billion and four billion birds annually in the Lower Forty-eight states, along with far greater numbers of small native mammals. The paper's authors based their modelling on a synthesis of numerous existing studies, plus straightforward math: How many American cats live largely or entirely outdoors? (More than a hundred million.) What proportion of them kill birds? (More than half.) And how many birds does a bird-killing cat kill in one year? (Perhaps three dozen.) Each of these multipliers had a range of uncertainty, so the model needed to be run repeatedly. The number it generated most often was 2.4 billion birds a year.

Outdoor-cat advocates were quick to dismiss the paper as "junk science." Their intellectual authority, Peter J. Wolf, on his cat-science blog, Vox Felina, seized on the reported base population of birds, ignored its huge expansion in summer, and asked how anyone could imagine that cats kill more than half of all American birds every year. Other criticisms of the paper partook of similarly misleading arguments. But I, too, at first, being skeptical of models, had trouble believing that the numbers could be so vast. Only after I looked at the underlying literature did I feel more comfortable with them. For example, one study, in Oklahoma, found birds in the stomachs of two of twenty-two cats roaming freely in a residential area. From this, since cats generally digest food in twenty-four hours or less, it's reasonable to infer that, on average, a cat eats a bird every eleven days, which comes to thirty-three birds per year, per cat. Similar studies have reported similar figures. Even if you mentally adjust the number downward to allow for the outdoor cats in urban areas with little birdlife, you have to adjust it upward to allow for the many birds that are killed or fatally wounded without being eaten (few small animals survive infections from cat bites) and the young birds that starve when a parent is killed.

The most dismal number in the *Nature Communications* paper was its median estimate for the birds killed annually by cats with owners: six hundred and eighty-four million. Unlike the death toll from unowned cats, this number could be zero, because tame cats can be kept indoors. In my experience, people who let them outside have various rationales regarding wildlife. They say that their cat doesn't kill birds, or that it must not happen often, since their cat rarely brings them a dead bird, or that a well-fed cat loses its drive to hunt, or that their cat would suffer indoors for want of stimulation, or that, although the toll on wildlife is regrettable, their cat also kills rats. Some cats do, in fact, show little interest in birds, but the other rationales are more wishful than evidence-based. Anyone can see that cats that are well fed still pounce on small moving objects, and that cats can lead healthy and seemingly contented lives indoors. Research has shown that cats typically bring home only a fraction of their kills, and that, while they do often kill mice, they are much more reluctant to attack a full-size rat (for that, you need a terrier). I also have friends who, if I suggest that they might not want to let their cats outside, respond not with rationales but with uneasiness. My guess is that, just as I will sometimes eat a tuna sandwich, despite knowing what I know about tuna fisheries, my friends are doing a small thing that they know isn't right but is convenient. In a darker way, I wonder if one of the attractions of having cats as pets is precisely that, however affectionate they may be, they have a savage side as well, sharp of tooth and keen of claw.

These teeth and claws account for a significant percentage of bird mortality in the United States. Although cat defenders dispute the scale of the numbers, few of them go so far as to deny that cats kill lots of birds. Instead, they may assert that the killing, rather than adding to over-all mortality, merely "compensates" for premature deaths by natural causes. They point to studies that have shown that birds killed by cats are less fit, on average, than birds killed in other ways, such as collisions with buildings. (Other studies indicate that the presence of cats causes birds to waste energy in defense and alarm, and to neglect their young; it could be that birds killed by cats are less fit because they were already stressed from living near them.) Undoubtedly, in many instances, cats are only doing the deadly work that nature would have done anyway, at worst depriving native predators of meals they might have had. But it's hard to see how a non-native predator, likely responsible

LEAVING

Not the pleasure of lovers but the pleasure of letters,
a pleasure like weather, delayed and prepared for,
not the pleasure of lessons but the pleasure of errors,
of nightmares, of actors in the black box of a theatre,
not the pleasure of present but the pleasure of later,
the pleasure of letters and weather and terror, asleep
by the lake, unable to answer, the pleasure of candles,
their wax on the table, not the pleasure of saviors
but the pleasure of errors, not the pleasure of marriage
but the pleasure of failure, the pleasure of characters
like family members, their failures and errors, their
laughter and weather, the pleasure of water, terrible
rivers, not the pleasure of empire but the pleasure
of after, our failure to keep an accurate record, not
the pleasure of tethers but the pleasure of strangers,
the terrible strangers who will become your lovers,
not the pleasure of novels but the pleasure of anger,
your failure to answer all of my letters, the pleasure
of daughters, the pleasure of daughters writing letters
in April, the failure of orchards, the terror of mothers,
not the pleasure of planners but the pleasure of errors.

—Madeleine Cravens

for a billion-plus bird deaths a year, and for a much larger number of mammal deaths, has had *no* net negative effect on American ecosystems.

But maybe the predator isn't actually non-native? Alley Cat Allies, on its Web site, assures its supporters that domesticated cats have lived outdoors for more than ten thousand years, "sharing the environment with birds and wildlife." Unfortunately, although this is true in some regions of the Old World, where domestic cats originated, it isn't true in the New World, where cats are an introduced species with a population vastly greater than what could be sustained in the wild, without human subsidy. Worldwide, in ecosystems where cats have been introduced, they've contributed to the extinction of at least sixty-three bird, mammal, and reptile species. Thus far, to be sure, the extinctions have occurred only on islands and in Australia, and cat advocates stress that cats are highly unlikely to cause extinctions on the North American mainland. Peter Wolf, who is employed by Best Friends, has emphasized on his blog that cats tend to kill common bird species, rather than rare ones; since it's hardly a surprise that rare birds are killed more rarely, the point of his emphasis seems to be that additive mortality is O.K. as long as no species is threatened with extinction. A more subtle implication is that, while cats are valued as individuals (toothless, starving Maeve), birds need be treated only as populations, and, further, that these populations are evenly distributed. In places like Los Angeles, the fragments of remaining habitat are functionally islands, where species can and do disappear, and are mourned by the people who knew them. A bird-lover's attachment to a local family of quail is easily as strong as a cat-lover's feeling for the feral cats that prey on it. The difference is that nature put the quail there, while human beings put the cats there. The cats don't have a choice, but people do.

Best Friends Animal Society began, in the nineteen-eighties, as an independent animal sanctuary, situated in scenic red-rock canyon country near Zion National Park. Some of the sanctuary's founders had been associated with the Process Church of the Final Judgment, a hippie-era group that sought to integrate satanic and Christian energies, and they'd determined that kindness, specifically kindness to animals, should be their guiding principle. Although the Process Church has since disbanded and Best Friends has no religious affiliation, a Christian flavor lingers in the motto that became its trademark, Save Them All. The sanctuary today employs more than three hundred people, and it has grown to occupy six thousand acres, on which there are electric-vehicle charging stations, a pair of R.V. campgrounds, and a spacious vegan café. Of the thirty thousand people who visit in a given year, many are Best Friends members, for whom the trip can be something like a pilgrimage. Some have paid to have a pet interred in the Angel's Rest cemetery. Others have been honored, for past donations, with a plaque on a wall or a bench. But the sanctuary's chief attraction is that it's a model of animal-rescue best practices.

The sanctuary is a working care-and-adoption facility, not a place where animals roam. On a clear morning in August, I toured it with one of the founders, Francis Battista, a vigorous and prepossessing man in his seventies. Battista was quick to tell me that he, too, is a bird-watcher. As we proceeded up through juniper-piñon woodland, in his dusty S.U.V., he handed me a laminated guide to local birds and mentioned his particular love of juncos. We made a stop in Horse Haven, where horses are rehabilitated in an enormous roofed enclosure, and another in Dogtown Heights, where octagonal "lodges," designed in the manner of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, are grouped around a state-of-the-art canine "fitness center." One of the lodges had been specially outfitted to rehabilitate the traumatized dogs that Best Friends took in from the N.F.L. quarterback Michael Vick. "We used their stories to engage the public," Battista said.

Every animal in the sanctuary has a name. In a unit for cats with special needs, in Cat World, I met Aurora, who was blind; Howard, who'd been treated for feline infectious peritonitis; and a small cat, Circleville, who was missing a foreleg. Passing by some cats afflicted with cerebellar hypoplasia, an incurable and crippling condition, we came to an area where visitors can interact with potential adoptees. On the floor was a flat plastic puzzle, with paw-size openings on top, from which a handsome gray cat was trying to extract treats. A young woman, sitting with a different cat, told us that the sanctuary had been on her bucket list, and that she'd come down from Washington State with an empty pet carrier. It was moving to see her there, and to learn that many of the special-needs cats find homes within a year. Then again, although the sanctuary is the country's largest No Kill facility for companion animals, with an operating budget of twenty million dollars, it houses fewer cats than can be found living outdoors in one Los Angeles neighborhood.

For lunch, in a green glade at the foot of red-rock cliffs, Battista and I were joined by his son, Judah. When I asked them about the problem of outdoor cats, Francis cited statistics indicating that they suffer less than people may think, but he allowed that both cats and birds are at risk. Judah, who co-founded Best Friends when he was only fourteen, hewed more closely to its official line. "We would like to manage and decrease the free-roaming cat population," he said. "We believe it can be done through a more holistic engagement with a broader community." In the meantime, he suggested, cats are not a threat to native ecosystems: "They're not out here in the wild. They're in urbanized environments with a dramatic number of negative influences for wildlife—pesticides, traffic, glass windows, you name it. They live where there are people."

A family of quail had emerged from the shadows near our lunch table. I commented that people and cats are pretty much everywhere now, not just in city centers, and that cats and dogs seem to have been granted special status as animals, higher than that of wildlife. I asked the Battistas if an individual cat's life has more value than the lives of the animals it kills.

"We believe that the lives of all animals have intrinsic value," Francis said. "I don't disagree with you that there is an elevation of value of domesticated

dogs and cats. But I don't think we regard those quail, or the other little animals around here, any less."

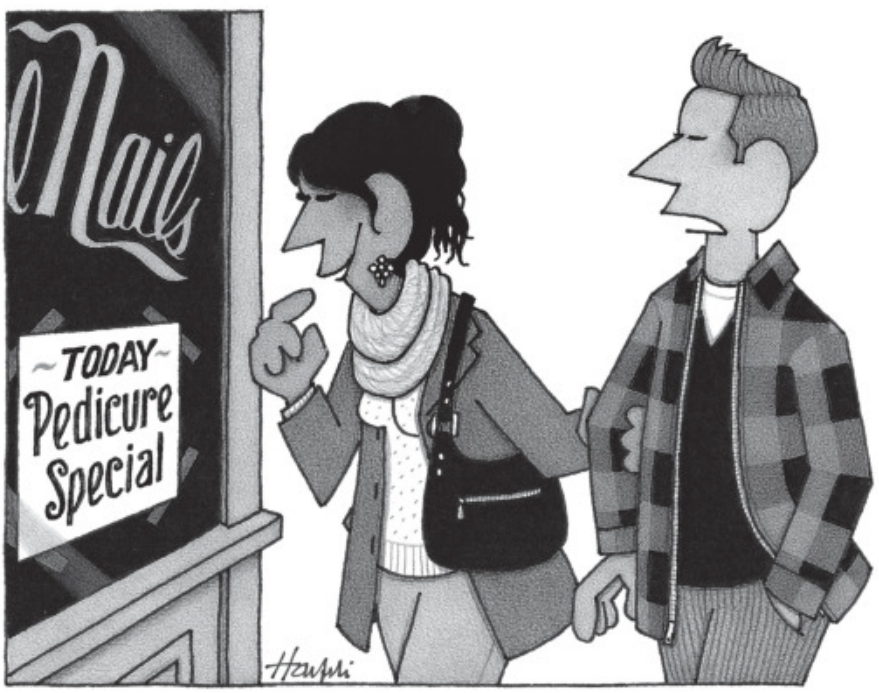
"Dogs and cats are the first step outside of 'Humans are the only thing,'" Judah said. "If we can establish a value of solving problems not by killing animals, there's no reason not to extrapolate that more broadly. If we can break the pattern with our companion animals, which most people consider family, it sets the stage for doing things differently going forward."

I said that, being pessimistic about human nature, I fear that we've merely made dogs and cats into honorary humans and added them to our families, and that a family is defined by what it excludes—in this case, wildlife. The Battistas agreed that this was pessimistic of me.

When I brought up T.N.R., Judah proposed that it seems ineffective because we've never tried it at a large scale, with full funding and community engagement, and given it time to work. "There's this idea that it doesn't work, and so we're not going to fund it fully," he said. "Right now, in Los Angeles, the approach is very passive—'There are vouchers available if you're interested.'"

I struggled to imagine how T.N.R. efforts could be vastly scaled up. Francis acknowledged that there is already a shortage of veterinarians nationwide, and that more and more vets work for corporations that emphasize premium pet services, rather than low-cost spay/neuter. At Orly Kroh's request, I asked why Best Friends couldn't sponsor some mobile clinics in Los Angeles. Judah explained that its current priority is promoting adoption, not providing direct services. "L.A. is not a resource-poor environment," Francis added. "We're heavily invested in some of the worst parts of the country, like South Texas and New Mexico." In those "resource deserts," he said, the group's chief veterinarian trains vets to do high-volume spay/neuter surgeries. At the same time, Best Friends opposes laws requiring that pets be sterilized, on the ground that such laws are costly to poor people and difficult to enforce, and it did not object to a recent decision by PetSmart Charities, which has been a funder of Best Friends, to suspend its requirement that young animals be fixed before being adopted from a PetSmart store. In defense of PetSmart, Judah said that leaving spay/neuter to the adopters encourages them to become "participants."

Participation and community are recurrent Best Friends themes. Like the stories it tells in its promotional materials, accompanied by pictures of cats with fetchingly startled expressions and dogs smiling or frolicking, the story the Battistas told me about humanity was inspirational. They envision a world in which adopters actively participate in animal-loving communities, unowned-cat populations dwindle as communities participate in caring for them, and humanity as a whole evolves in a kinder direction. Critics of Best Friends are unimpressed with its stories ("It's a lot easier to raise money on Save Them All than Spay Them All," Lisa Lange, of PETA, said), but neither of the Battistas struck me as venal or phony. I got the impression, instead, of true belief—militantly pure in Judah, more nuanced in Francis. Although their politics are generally liberal, and although No Kill doesn't preclude some euthanasia, the imperative to "save them all" is reminiscent of the anti-abortion movement's faith-based insistence on saving every unborn life, regardless of the circumstances. In its simplicity, the imperative also recalls the nostrums of progressives: "Open the borders," "Defund the police." The allure of simple prescriptions derives from an aversion to hard choices, and to the truth of human carelessness and cruelty. Everyone wants to tell their children a happy story: If we take a homeless cat to a shelter, it's sure to find a loving home.



"My feet are just too far away to fuss over."

When I went out again with Gail Raff and Orly Kroh, two nights after the trapping mission, Kroh had sad news from the kitten rescuer. "Poor Christine," she said. "The little kitty died. She gave it fluids, she did oxygen, she did everything." She shook her head. "The kitty got to know love."

Our destination was a charmless residential neighborhood, abutting the Hollywood Freeway, where Raff and Kroh feed street cats. Their first station, an upended plastic bin, stood by a weedy lot on which a boat had been parked for as long as they could remember. As Raff approached the bin, carrying water and dry food, a cat named Tory materialized in the twilight. "How could you not fall in love with this?" she said, admiring Tory. "You see the ear tip? She's been here a long time."

"We name them all," Kroh told me. "We don't want them to be just cats on the street."

Several dozen adult cats live outdoors

in the immediate area. Raff and Kroh not only know all of them, they know most of the human residents as well. Around a corner from the first station, we passed the house of a man who feeds four or five of the cats. He knew an acquaintance of Kroh's spin-class teacher, and the teacher alerted Kroh to an abandoned house where an old woman had been feeding cats. Kroh and Raff came to trap and fix them, and they've been feeding them ever since. When a young couple bought the house and had a baby, Kroh and Raff relocated the cats by moving the feeding station away from it, house by house. One cat refused to leave, but the couple decided to live with that. "It's one cat, not sixteen," Kroh said.

The other cats now feed near an overgrown grassland, attractive to birds and coyotes, that is bordered by the freeway and by a fence with a large hole in it. In failing light, Raff emptied cans of wet cat food onto a broken slab of concrete. She also dispenses kibble, about sixteen pounds of it a week, at various locations, but "these guys," she said, "get treated right." I asked her how much she and Kroh spend on cat food. She couldn't even guess, but Kroh said she knew, because her husband brings it up. "It's a few thousand a year."

Cats were emerging from bushes, from beneath a yellow Hummer in the nearest driveway, and from lawns farther up the street. Among them were Crystal, Batman, Brave, and Tofu. None of them seemed to be in a hurry or to be interested in the others. All of them were ear-tipped, and many looked reasonably healthy, but one of them had peritonitis and was lacking an eye. Raff and Kroh spoke of others that had been poisoned or had simply gone missing, as cats will do when coyotes are present. To keep out the coyotes, a local homeowner repaired the fence along the grassland, but homeless people have since reopened the hole in it, and sometimes they appropriate a plastic bin from the feeding station. A woman once explained to Kroh that she needed a bin to put her clothes in.

For an unhoused person, feeding unhoused cats can be a way to feel good about giving. Even among the housed, feeders tend to live on the margins. Among the classic cat-feeding types in the Valley, Raff and Kroh mentioned an elderly Hispanic man and a solitary woman with kibble in her shopping cart. Staycee Dains, of L.A. Animal Services, said, "It's hard to stop feeding. You feed your family, you feed what you love—the person becomes almost biochemically bonded. When you tell them to stop feeding the cats, it's like you're asking them to kill them." Animal Services does not discourage feeding, but it recommends that food be put out for no longer than thirty minutes, and that any leftovers be collected, so as not to attract native predators. This recommendation appears to be universally disregarded. Raff and Kroh have their own definition of responsible feeding, which is to make sure that the cats they feed are fixed. "There are lots of feeder-breeders," Kroh told me once. "They don't want them fixed, because they love the kitties."

Such feeders are effectively outdoor-cat hoarders, akin to the people who hoard cats in their dwellings. Raff and Kroh's third feeding station was by the house of a woman who, while seemingly prosperous, allows numberless cats to come and go through her windows. As Raff walked along the side of the house, attracting four of them, the front door opened a few inches and closed again.

"We don't know what's in her house," Raff said.

"One of the neighbors checks on her," Kroh said. "She'd tell us if there were kittens."

"You'd think she might ever say thank you."

"I left her a bottle of wine at Christmas to thank her for letting us feed her cats."

At this station, too, Raff put out wet food. "These cats are so inbred," she remarked. "This black-and-white one only has one eye."

Wet or dry, cat food consists almost entirely of animal parts. Watching the inbred cats eat their meat, in the loneliness emanating from the house, I glimpsed a dystopian future in which, to quote Judah Battista, "humans are the only thing." Los Angeles has abundant habitat for resident and migratory birds, and for all manner of mammals and reptiles; the city should be full of wildlife. Instead, more and more, it belongs to one domesticated species, sustained by meat from elsewhere.

If everyone in the country stopped letting their cats run free outdoors, the predatory impact on American ecosystems would be dramatically reduced. To go further, and humanely reduce the unowned-cat population, would be a slower process. It might include T.N.R., provided that the cats are registered, microchipped for identification, and released to safe and confined locations. Since T.N.R. will never be enough, there would also need to be ongoing efforts to remove cats from the environment, partly through adoption, partly through placement in sanctuaries, and partly through euthanasia. This, in turn, would mean reassessing No Kill. The preoccupation with shelter kills has resulted in more cats outside, and it has taken focus off the deeper problem, which is reproduction. Saving a nest of unweaned kittens is a heartwarming act, but there's no shortage of adoptable kittens, and neonatal care can be very expensive. In theory, saving kittens shouldn't preclude increasing support of spay/neuter and educating communities about its importance. In practice, even a city like Los Angeles is a resource desert. When I asked Annette Ramirez, an assistant general manager of L.A. Animal Services, approximately how much of its budget is earmarked for education, she had a precise answer. "It's zero," she said.

A neighborhood overrun with cats is a spectacle of contradictions. Our sympathy for animals has created a situation that's terrible for animals. Cats are considered creatures of the natural world but also members of the family. (If a child had a penchant for disembowelling wildlife, would his parents shrug and say it's just his nature?) Human progress is the argument for reforming the shelters, while long tradition is the argument for leaving cats outdoors. The people who feed feral cats are owners who don't own them, and No Kill doesn't mean no killing. At the root of the contradictions are difficult choices that haven't been made. Both cats and nature pay the price. ♦

Crown Heights North

Rivka Galchen

ILLUSTRATION BY LEO JUNG

The dead man decided to try the running app. He hadn't run for years. Not since his mid-thirties. Now he was in his early fifties. Or he had been in his early fifties, recently enough. Would he be in his early fifties forever? He tapped the gray oblong and waited as the percentage-downloaded dial advanced, slowly. *Much has yet to be revealed*, he whispered to himself, in a tone he had used more often when he was a kid, when he had expected his life to resemble a tale of adventure, or of horror, or one with a mystery to solve, or a magical stone to obtain.

He felt kind of embarrassed—but why, and in front of whom? He had heard good things about the app and he didn't want to run "alone." A voice to keep him company: it was like that Ray Bradbury story he'd read so many times when he was young. Even after he knew its trick, the story was still compelling. In it, an automated voice in a house says things like "Nine-fifteen, time to clean," "Which poem would you like this evening?," and "Since you express no preference, I shall select a poem at random." Eventually, it becomes clear that a nuclear apocalypse, or something of that sort, has wiped out the family and probably humanity, but that the house persists, trying to tend to people who will never return. Did they still teach that story to kids, now that houses really did speak to them, and vice versa? Anyhow, he, the dead man, was up for the companionship of a recorded voice. His wife, through his illness, had said that this running app kept her sane.

The app consisted of a bunch of "Guided Runs," in which various people—coaches, meditation gurus, professional athletes, unappealing artists—talked to you while you ran. At the end of each run, you received data: how far you'd gone, and where, and at what pace. You could earn badges, like a Girl Scout or a soldier, his wife had told him. They just speak cheerful nonsense to you, and it's somehow really reassuring, she said. She sat by his bed in the I.C.U., sharing little thoughts with him, even when he couldn't answer her. She told him about a movie in which one of the main characters wore large headphones in most of the scenes, and you could hear what he was hearing, and not hear what he wasn't hearing, and it had given her a headache. In oases of wellness, when not intubated, he told her about his I.C.U. deliriums. They were hellscapes beyond anything he had ever read or imagined, with horrifying—yet vague and shifting—predicaments, and hostile beings, and also with furniture somehow, of impossible sizes, and the telling failed to communicate the terror, and the only gentle moment he could recall from vision after vision of threat was the feeling, briefly, of a sleepy and benign panther that lived beneath his hospital bed. Why had he never heard or read about this overwhelming phenomenon? He wished it could be transcribed, but it turned as if into lint when he surfaced into full consciousness. Often when he couldn't speak, his wife would read aloud to him, which she knew he perceived, because the measurements of his blood pressure and heart rate on the forever monitors would settle down in response to her ongoing voice. She read Trollope to him, she read the writings of Julian of Norwich. She read "The Lord of the Rings," which his dad had read to him when he was a child, but she decided to stop when the plot moved from parties with hobbits and elves to endless wars. She apologized that she wasn't allowed to bring in their dog, who missed him.

That was then. Now company, even that of a recorded voice, was probably more than a good idea. *This is a necessary part of the adventure*, the dead man said to himself. He scrolled through the Guided Run options. A "Stress-Free" run. A "Running for More Purpose" run. A "Running for Joy" run. A "Menstruation and Training" run, split into two thirty-minute blocks. A "Running for Creativity" run. O.K., so this is not marketed to me, he thought. All the better.

He settled on a "Comeback Run," guided by the app's Global Head Coach. The app asked if he wanted to input which sneakers he was wearing for the run. He did not. Though he felt some sympathy with the practice of hawking wares. It had seemed so tiresome for so long, but now it seemed to him . . . eternal? He hadn't been remembering much, other than the nightmare of the hospital, but now a memory surfaced, asking for his attention. As a young man, he had visited the Sinai Peninsula. He ate cucumbers and sliced Spam in a beach shack near the Red Sea. Later, he had visited a wadi, where he noticed a figure crossing the vast, shadeless sands. What unfathomable intuitions and desires move a person from here to there across a hostile desert, he had wondered. During those travels, he had been reading "The Tale of Genji" and "Moby-Dick" and the works of Thomas Browne, and other things far from his lived experience—but also near, since they were from his roommate's bookshelf. The figure arrived. She unfurled her thin cerulean-blue scarf and laid out bracelets, earrings, a few pins. She was hawking wares.

O.K. Fifteen minutes. He stepped out into his same-old-but-somehow-not neighborhood. The same mixture of Caribbean immigrants and Orthodox Jews and pale youngish people who drank iced coffee with surreal frequency. *You showed up*, the recorded voice said. *Which maybe is something you weren't able to do yesterday!* The dead man started to jog, slowly, with his weak, deconditioned legs. *It's not that I don't care where you were yesterday or the day before—I do care. But I care more that you're here now.* He did not feel like a gazelle, or even like a chubby dog. His arms felt heavy, his fists like clay. *I want to celebrate that you're here. Celebrating starting lines is as important as celebrating finish lines.*

Someone had suggested to his wife that she hire a death doula, but she knew him well enough to know that he did not want a death doula, and he reminded her of the time they visited a friend who had recently given birth and she educated them on the benefits of placenta smoothies and served them cookies with breast milk. Support, coaching, advice, in-touchness: it was all adjacent to unbearable. But the Global Head Coach's voice: he didn't turn it off. As he ran, he felt a compression on his calves, not wholly unlike the inflatable cuffs they had put on his legs in the hospital. He listened as the coach chatted about having taught high-school history and coached track for seven years, and how in that time he had seen victories, and defeats, and heartbreak, and tremendous strength. A small harpoon feeling assaulted the dead man's forearm, and a muffled ringing sounded in his head. The Global Head Coach said that he often messed up his own comeback runs, by expecting too much from them. It's very difficult, Coach went on, to go from the state of not running to the state of running, and what's awesome and brave is to run easy, because the best comeback run is one that leaves you feeling ready to come back and run again tomorrow. It's

FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA, CONEY ISLAND, 1929

1

For the moment a wave will make a splash
as if it might be sent to test
the waters where so many wail and gnash
their teeth and beat the breasts

they've inadvertently bared.
For the moment a wave will make a splash
and no expense be spared
in a country so brash

even the kids talk trash
as they line up for the Tornado or Cyclone.
For the moment a wave will make a splash
that will chill them to the bone

when they might otherwise succumb
to sunburn or a heat rash,
the banker waiting patiently alongside the bum
for the moment a wave will make a splash.

2

One of these days the guy with a mustache
who'll have tried to put his stamp
on Europe's beaches will look back on the clash
of armies as the Little Tramp

looks back on his golden age.
One of these days the guy with a mustache
will begin to rage
against those who've had the temerity to lash

out at him with a sabre and slash
him like a Tudor doublet.
One of these days the guy with a mustache
will have met

his end and sit in an abandoned circus ring
somewhat reminiscent of the gash
left by a howitzer. He'll be taking a downswing
one of these days, the guy with a mustache.

3

Until then we'll all quite happily pay cash
for a tintype print
of a bathing beauty sporting a sash
as a stick of peppermint

sports its striped apparel.
Until then we'll all quite happily pay cash
on the barrel
for a barrel of sour mash,

part of the most recent cache

funny, the dead man thought, as he ran around his neighborhood park, listening to Coach, because, if I were to have imagined Hell, it would have a voice-over like Coach, and a landscape in which everything was the same, but also completely wrong, sapped of . . . love? Hell. And yet, since he was running by the same trees and houses and torn plastic bags that he and his wife had again and again walked by, and what with love being a mystery and time a conundrum, this place also converged with a vision of Heaven.

The north side of Crown Heights, maybe because he had lived there when he was ill, was where—sorry, but it was true, he told himself—life had revealed itself to be an abundance, a gift. Mornings, a convention of dogs would manifest in the park. Some dogs dedicated themselves to speed. Others to shade. Or to winning over the affection of strangers. Or to retrieving orange rubber balls or running laps with an impromptu gang of other dogs, whoever had turned up that day. What a just society! The owners were, mostly, weird, sure. The dogs represented an alternative and superior value system, he had decided. Though he wondered if the nearness of death had messed with his perception, like those gas-station sunglasses of childhood road trips. At the courts near the field of dogs, beautiful young men—and occasionally a few women—played basketball. The park had a butterfly garden and skateboarding ramps and ledges and a handball court. There was often a man who knit with yarn the colors of the Jamaican flag, and a cheerful drug dealer with a female bulldog who wore a blue sweater, and there were children on scooters with Orthodox moms who looked like teenagers and maybe were teen-agers. Unexpected sequel, he thought, for a neighborhood most famous, decades earlier, for the death of a young child hit by a car in a blue-eyed rabbi's motorcade which ran a red light, and then days of angry crowds in the street and the murder of a visiting student. The rabbi, who had since died, still appeared, smiling, on large stickers on the back of most crosswalk lights in the neighborhood, along with the words "Messiah Is Here."

Then the run was over.

He started to run every day, following nearly the same path each time: around the park, then around the park again, maybe inside the park, then around it one more time. It felt good. He didn't want to stray from that loop. He was reluctant to go beyond the familiar space. He got stronger, breathed less heavily, could run more laps. He downloaded in advance the runs that appealed to him, then paged through his "library" of runs. Runs organized by time appealed to him, not those organized by distance. He liked "recovery runs"—the ever-buoyant Global Head Coach, who was the corniest coach but also the one he chose the most often, insisted that *most* runs should be recovery runs. Sometimes he chose runs with "intervals," where you were asked to run,

of spiritous liquors spirited here from Quebec.
Until then we'll all quite happily pay cash
rather than write a check

to the Paradise for a single dish of ice cream.
Until then the wave will try to rehash
its one basic theme.
Until then we'll all quite happily pay cash.

4

Only this spring "The Desert Song" was a smash
for Edward Martindel as General Bierbeau,
drawing his sabre from a sabretache
to deal a blow

to the Berbers *tout de suite*.
Only this spring "The Desert Song" was a smash,
its drum, drum, drum of hoofbeats
originally played on a calabash

to represent the plash
of camels across a sandy wilderness.
Only this spring "The Desert Song" was a smash
and the sight of Myrna Loy in a flimsy dress

had many of us gasp
for air and wildly thrash.
So vivid is that memory it makes it hard to grasp
only this spring was "The Desert Song" a smash.

5

Before we know it there'll have been a crash
of cymbals as a band tries to regain
the attention of those for whom the flash
of a low-flying plane

along the shoreline was no mere quirk.
Before we know it there'll have been a crash
that'll leave millions out of work
and dash

our hopes precipitously as the ash
falls from a fairground cigar.
Before we know it there'll have been a crash
involving more than a dodgem car

in which the world will be turned on its head
and we lose even the stash
of laundered bills under our bed.
Before we know it there'll have been a crash.

—Paul Muldoon

then rest, then run, then rest, and the whole time you'd be told how strong you were, how good you looked, how proud this person who knew nothing about you was. It was infantile, and it was the result of years of research into how to get a person to push a button and move through space on command. It was a pleasure, which was not what he had spent his life, or most of it, seeking, as his wife had told him when he said he disliked barbecues, picnics, and sunset walks on beaches. It became as if all he was doing was running.

During a run one overcast afternoon, the dead man had the sensation that he could hear his heart beating in his left ear. In his weeks in the I.C.U.—or maybe it was months? Time wasn't a destroyer so much as a whirlpool—he had been convinced that he could feel his pancreas startle and secrete. He could see into his own body, and watch the enzymes, which looked like spilled mercury, asserting themselves, raying out along a confused net of vessels. It was the Edgar Allan Poe story not written, he thought. In moments that resembled clarity, from his hospital bed he composed letters in his mind to the heads of medical-research departments about what he was seeing. There should be interventions to protect people from having to traverse these menacing lands, he thought. At one point, he was being held firmly at the wrist by a woman in a purple cap who informed him that she was bringing him some ice and that his throat might feel sore. He remembered the feeling, as a child, of being inside an adventure, at the mouth of a cave within which dwelled maybe a wizard or an ogre, a false oracle or a real one, and the decision to be made was whether to ask a question, or to knock on the door, or to wield a longbow or a morning star, and then at the periphery his mom saying that she had left a grilled-cheese sandwich on the kitchen counter, and that she had to go, and that she was sorry, they were out of pickles, she would try to get some, but she was very busy, she was gone. The woman in purple told him he would feel more relaxed soon. He worried or hoped for a moment that he was still alive, that his conviction that he had died was only one more hostility, a word he often misread as "hospitality." But who, even in a dream or hallucination, would choose the adventure of dying in a hospital, where the lights were always on, where alarms sounded constantly, where potions moved through you as if through an unrenovated sewage-processing plant? *The run. Is. Done. You were awesome. Now get some fluids.*

He was getting stronger. Fifteen minutes would go by like a coffee, and running now felt like a crossing over from an ordinary life (or death) full of pain and anxiety, into a better life (or death) filled with more bearable kinds of pain, and anxieties that could fit into a pocket. Still, he didn't run out to new neighborhoods, he felt the need to stay close to home, to not fall off into realms beyond his map. Out there, they were probably

just hawking wares: incense, hazelnut cookies, button-up dress shirts. He wanted to stay within bounds. It was the opposite of the missions in the stories he had read when he was young: to find a way out of a peril-filled maze, to escape from a place where doors opened on their own when a secret but large metal button on a wall was pushed. Later plots, termed literature, were often still childlike stories about finding a way home or recovering lost time, his wife had pointed out to him during one of their first meals together, when personal conversations were still translated into impersonal observations. He had liked that. Maybe he was under a spell, and his comrades had been turned into pigs, and he had been lulled into running the same loop, again and again, around the familiar park, so that he wouldn't notice he was captive, and the feat he had to accomplish was to notice and to break his pattern.

And then there they were: traffic cones and security tape. The street in front of the park was blocked off. It was the funeral, a man wearing a tank top and walking a marble-cake-colored dog told him. A line of officers was assembled along the block adjacent to the park and then across the street and on over to the Nazarene church that was previously a synagogue and which still had the Hebrew lettering on its frieze. A bird rested on the small cross atop the building's dome. The dead man asked a man standing in shorts with his arms crossed: Who died? It was an officer who had been shot, off duty. Something random, was the sense. Just outside a deli, killed by a stranger, not something directed at him, or even at the "genre" of him, as a police officer.

"It's an outrage," a voice behind him said. Cars that had been parked along the path of the funeral procession had been towed to God knew where. A row of men in kilts began walking, in tandem, with bagpipes; with them was a line of drummers. "They do whatever they want, they answer to nobody, they're an institution of assholes," was being said, by a guy with an iced drink, to his companion, who wore a jumpsuit. A woman the dead man recognized as active in the church—she ran the Easter-egg hunt, she took care of the plants at the perimeter—was telling another woman that she knew the grieving mother. Her son had been in a coma for nearly three decades. So he had died a long time ago, but was dying only now. "We're all dying," the iced-coffee guy said. "No one's going to tow cars for me."

One disappointment about being dead, so far, was that he had assumed that, in dying, he would learn something. Or: his first assumption was that when he died there wouldn't be anything at all, let alone knowledge. But trailing behind that assumption was a firefly of hope. What was here? There were sparrows and paper clips. There were books, babies, Post-it notes with phone numbers, compost bins with graffiti, ambulance sirens, a statue of a Dalmatian. But as an afterlife was this . . . interesting? Informative? Back in his thirties, when for a spell he had run often, he had enjoyed the way it shook out little unexpected thoughts. Like: tartan plaids make sense, given how weaving works. Or: Thoreau must have had secrets. He had termed these unpursued thoughts "popcorn," a happy word for him, connected to the stovetop popcorn in those disposable aluminum pans with the balloon of thin foil that would pleasingly inflate and fill with popcorn, though sometimes the kernels burned. The "Struggle Run." Why not? The uncertainty of love, the certainty of death—one faced these things. But could he really care? On too many days, in his last months, thinking had lost its allure. He was more interested in watching a kid get frustrated by the difficulty of swimming down to the bottom of the pool to pick up coins; the water kept sending him back up. Boundless blessings was what he was supposed to think about life. He was so angry. The Global Head Coach told him that struggle is about contending with a problem. *Struggle is not about failing but about succeeding in not giving up.* Struggle was a particularly misleading term in relation to illness. He could have altered his outcome in no way. At one point, delirious with what was termed medication, he woke in the middle of the night, gripped his wife's arm, and said, *I have been seduced by the lie of metaphysics.* Later, when his wife told him this, they laughed. But being asleep was a castaway island, with no ships on the horizon. Coach said, *When we struggle, we're never alone. We beat ourselves up because it's easier than picking ourselves up.*

Late in his illness, he had a conversation in his office with Ben, his colleague. Ben had come from an Orthodox family, but had turned away from it—or something. "My father had a lot of medical problems, he really cursed God—but that's because he was like the prophets," Ben was saying to him, or at him. "He struggled with God." Ben could speak unceasingly if not interrupted, and it wasn't easy to interrupt him. Oblivious to the dead man's own "struggle," Ben talked on, hoarding the dead man's time, although his ramblings, which were heartfelt, now and again crossed over into the dead man's own concerns. "You know, the prophets, they struggled with God, too. It's about that struggle." He spoke of how the words Jesus said on the cross were, translated from the Aramaic: Father, why have you forsaken me? "That was my dad, that was his inner life." Ben was struggling, too, having been raised only to be a scholar in an imaginary Messianic landscape, and having left that imaginary landscape for the "real" landscape—what was he supposed to do? "People who think God is a person who gives out candy to some people and not to others—that's so wrong." He explained that it was like the Jews in the desert, complaining, and God said, Come to me, and they said, Why?, and he said, Because I'm God, and they said, It's not a good enough reason. They said, Come to us, and he said, Why?, and they said, Because we've suffered, and he said, That's not a good enough reason.

Even when you were dying, people yammered on about themselves. You could never get that time back. It was returning to him: being alive had become a hell on earth. Had his life been, after all, a tale of adventure? Of horror? Did the ending make any sense? He had felt love in his life and where could it be found now? He saw, at the edge of the familiar park, that mysterious expanse of sand he had visited as a young man. He saw, again, in the distance, a woman, heading toward him. What intuition or desire could be sending her out across that hostile, shadeless expanse? As she neared, it was not without some sense of surprise that the thought arrived that maybe a different kind of story waited for him, one he had never read before, one that he wouldn't have to read alone. *You're awesome*, the Global Head Coach said. *I'm so proud.* ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Rivka Galchen on the inner lives of the dead.

BOOKS

OPEN SEASON

The rising popularity of polyamory.

BY JENNIFER WILSON

On Season 1 of HBO's "Succession," the telecom heiress Shiv Roy (Sarah Snook) shocked her social-climber partner, Tom Wambsgans (Matthew Macfadyen), by sharing her misgivings about monogamy—on their wedding night. "I'm just wondering if there's an opportunity for something different from the whole boxed-set death march," she confesses, still in her gown. Committed to marrying up, Tom pretends to be down with the whole thing, but, a season later, he backs out of a threesome aboard the family yacht, and out of the arrangement altogether, claiming that Shiv "shanghaied" him "into an open-borders free-fuck trade deal."

A brief scan of popular culture will tell you that Tom, save for his critique of laissez-faire capitalism, is behind the times. Marriage has been drafty lately. Everywhere you turn, the door couples close behind them when they enter the sanctum of matrimony is being left ajar. Bored with the old-fashioned affair, prestige TV has traded in adultery for a newer, younger model, mining open relationships for drama. In fiction, consensual non-monogamy has appeared in a spate of recent books, including "Luster" (2020), by Raven Leilani, "Acts of Service" (2022), by Lillian Fishman, and Maggie Millner's "Couplets" (2023), a novel whose title plays with the overlapping nature of coupledom among polyamorous young Brooklynites. In cinema,

Non-monogamy is increasingly being presented not as a threat to marriage but as a way to save it.

ILLUSTRATION BY SARAH MAZZETTI

the couple has been made passé by the au-courant throuple, with films like "Passages" (2023) and next year's "Challengers" chasing the thrill of the third. In March of 2023, Gucci premièred a perfume ad featuring Julia Garner, Elliot Page, and A$AP Rocky all staring amorously into one another's eyes to the fifties doo-wop tune "Life Is But a Dream." The video is captioned "Co-create a world of openhearted bliss in the new Gucci Guilty campaign." The ménage à trois has become so trendy that, in the fifth season of Netflix's "The Crown," Princess Diana's famous quip to Martin Bashir regarding her husband's affair with Camilla Parker Bowles, "There were three of us in this marriage, so it was a bit crowded," misses the sting of the original. If anything, by today's standards three's not *enough* company. "Riverdale," the CW's adaptation of the classic Archie Comics, ended its series run by revealing that Archie, Veronica, Jughead, and Betty were all in a romantic "quad."

What are all these open couples, throuples, and polycules suddenly doing in the culture, besides one another? To some extent, art is catching up with life. Fifty-one per cent of adults younger than thirty told Pew Research, in 2023, that open marriage was "acceptable," and twenty per cent of all Americans report experimenting with some form of non-monogamy. The extramarital "entanglements" of Will and Jada Pinkett Smith have been tabloid fodder for the past two years. (Pinkett Smith once clarified that their marriage is not "open"; rather, it is a "relationship of transparency.") In 2020, the reality show "House Hunters," on HGTV, saw a throuple trying to find their dream home—one with a triple-sink vanity. The same year, the city of Somerville, Massachusetts, allowed domestic partnerships to be made up of "two or more" people.

Some, like the sex therapist (and author of "Open Monogamy, A Guide to Co-Creating Your Ideal Relationship Agreement," 2021), Tammy Nelson, have attributed the acceptance of a greater number of partners to pandemic-born domestic ennui; after being stuck with one person all day every day, the thinking goes, couples are ready to open up more than their pods. Nelson is part of a cohort of therapists, counsellors, and advice writers, including Esther Perel and the "Savage Love" columnist Dan Savage, who are encouraging married couples to think more flexibly about monogamy. Their advice has found an eager audience among the well-heeled attendees of the "ideas festival" circuit, featured in talks at Google, SXSW, and the Aspen Institute.

The new monogamy skepticism of the moneyed gets some screen time in the pandemic-era breakout hit "The White Lotus." The show mocks the leisure class as they mope around five-star resorts in Hawaii and Sicily, stewing over love, money, and the impossibility, for people in their tax bracket, of separating the two. In the latest season, Ethan (Will Sharpe) and Harper (Aubrey Plaza) are an attractive young couple stuck in a sexless marriage—until, that is, they go on vacation with the monogamish Cameron (Theo James) and Daphne (Meghann Fahy). After Cameron and Harper have some unaccounted-for time together in a hotel room, Ethan tracks down an unbothered Daphne, lounging on the beach, to share his suspicion that something has happened between their spouses. Some momentary concern on Daphne's face quickly morphs—in a devastatingly subtle performance by Fahy—into a sly smile. "A little mystery? It's kinda sexy," she assures Ethan, before luring him into a seaside cove. That night Ethan and Harper have sex, the wounds of their marriage having been healed by a little something on the side.

"The White Lotus" is not the only recent cultural offering that shows the rich using non-monogamy as a vaccine against an expensive divorce. In the 2021 HBO remake of "Scenes from a Marriage," Mira (Jessica Chastain) and Jonathan (Oscar Isaac), a high-powered executive for a tech company and a professor, respectively, are having dinner with their friends Peter (Corey Stoll) and Kate (Nicole Beharie), who are in an open marriage. When they were monogamous, Kate tells Mira, they barely made love, and now—"I wore him out," Kate brags.

These shows, with their well-off couples ready to experiment with open relationships as a marital pick-me-up, depict the surprising fate of a radical social proposal. Non-monogamy, once the province of utopian communities like Oneida, which maligned matrimony as just another form of private ownership, is increasingly being presented not as a threat to bourgeois marriage but, rather, as a way to save the institution and all that it affords.

"American Poly," a new book by the historian Christopher M. Gleason, offers some explanations for how this came to be the state of our affairs. (The term "polyamory" is thought to have been coined in 1990, but Gleason backdates to encompass various forms of consensual non-monogamy.) Gleason's book does not purport to be a sweeping study of free love in the U.S., a history that would include more on its adoption by socialists, beatniks, and queer liberationists. Instead, "American Poly" focusses more narrowly on the post-nineteen-sixties polyamory movement. Gleason argues, persuasively, that contemporary polyamory as a set of ideas and practices was articulated by the kind of free-love advocates best positioned to survive conservative backlash in the nineteen-eighties. These tended to be socially liberal fiscal conservatives who wanted love to be as free as the market.

One such figure was Jud Presmont, the leader of Kerista, a free-love movement that grew to prominence in San Francisco in the sixties, attracting the admiration of Allen Ginsberg. Keristans were faithful, albeit in groups of up to twenty-four. To discourage romantic attachment and possessiveness, they referred to these love nests as "best friend identity clusters" (B.F.I.C.). There were two people to a bed, but on a rotational sleeping schedule, insuring equal bonding time among B.F.I.C. members of the opposite sex. (Reading about this, I recalled a friend telling me, "Poly people just have a scheduling fetish.") Though the Keristans pooled their finances and shared child-care responsibilities, they were decidedly not socialists. Presmont's passion for polyamory was matched only by his desire to defeat the Soviets, and to see America triumph over Communism. During the nineteen-seventies and eighties, the group even started several businesses, including one that rented out Macintosh computers called Utopian Technologies. Its members believed "the freedom to do what they were doing was proof of America's greatness," Gleason writes.

As backlash to the sexual revolution

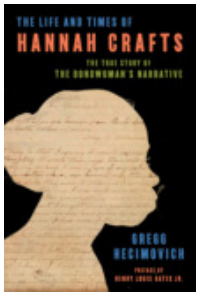
took hold in the nineteen-eighties, polyamory adapted itself to the times. Gleason cites the impact of one person in particular, Ryam Nearing, a Keristan-curious woman who settled outside Eugene, Oregon, with her two "husbands." Nearing had split off from the movement over the issues of organized religion (she found Kerista as dogmatic as the Catholicism she'd left behind) and romantic attachment. She didn't want a best-friend identity cluster; she wanted a marriage, albeit one with two men. "Nearing was uniquely suited to fight for ethical nonmonogamy within the cultural climate of the Reagan era," Gleason explains. She was pro-family, pro-fidelity, and a fiscal conservative.

Nearing established a nonprofit called Polyfidelitous Educational Productions; in the summer of 1986, she organized a conference, PEPCON, that was billed as a "networking weekend filled with workshops, films, games, dancing, and discussion groups." The topics included "cooperative parenting," "sharing money," and "tantra."

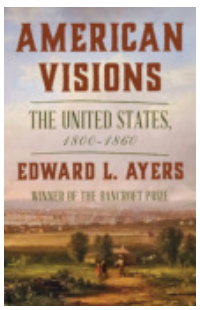
Joined by Deborah Anapol, a polyamorous clinical psychologist, Nearing made non-monogamy the kind of life style you could bring home to Mom and Dad. In 1994, Nearing and Anapol began putting out a magazine titled *Loving More*. Their aim was to wrap the project of polyamory in language that they thought would be well received by the mainstream. In messaging the benefits of polyamory, they emphasized its reliance on honesty, personal responsibility, and a structured code of ethics. This coalition of polyamorists "did not chide conservative reverence for family values," Gleason writes. "Rather, they internalized the conservative emphasis on stability and commitment, reframing the sustainment of multiple intimate partners not as an undoing of family values but as a necessary evolution in familial dynamics that better safeguarded the family from the alienation, isolation, and economic hardships of the post-nuclear age." Non-monogamy could be the loyal spouse's help-meet, they argued, a release valve that might keep a frustrated wife or husband from blowing the roof off the entire institution.

As polyamory found greater acceptance in the nineteen-nineties, the movement shed its remaining countercultural

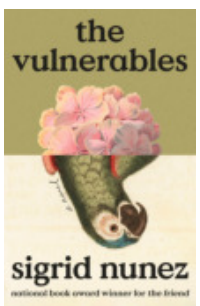
BRIEFLY NOTED



The Life and Times of Hannah Crafts, *by Gregg Hecimovich (Ecco)*. In 2002, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., published an annotated edition of "The Bondswoman's Narrative," a novel thought to be the first written by an enslaved Black woman. Its author was unknown until Hecimovich, a scholar of Victorian literature, traced the manuscript to Hannah Crafts, a mixed-race captive who was born in 1826. Like her novel's protagonist, Crafts was likely the offspring of rape, her first captor having been her biological father. As she was passed from one household to the next, she was taught to read and exposed to popular literature; her novel would eventually draw on Dickens's "Bleak House." Alongside Crafts's story, Hecimovich recounts the painstaking process of his research, which included forensic analysis of paper and ink and the creative use of incomplete archives.



American Visions, *by Edward L. Ayers (Norton)*. This nimble history surveys the "visions" that Americans fashioned for the nation taking shape before them in the "lurching" period of 1800 to 1860. These ideals were expressed through literature, visual art, popular songs, political slogans, religious doctrines, and folk heroes (such as Johnny Appleseed, who, Ayers argues, represented "the American frontier cleansed of dispossession and despoliation"). Ayers anchors his study with familiar figures, but he pays particular attention to lesser-known Black abolitionists and Native Americans. The result is a dynamic portrait of a country in transition.



The Vulnerables, *Sigrid Nunez (Riverhead)*. In this ruminative novel set during the COVID pandemic, the narrator, an intellectual living in New York, lends her apartment to a visiting pulmonologist and moves into one belonging to acquaintances who have decamped to a suburb, leaving behind their pet macaw. Her living arrangement is soon disrupted by the unannounced arrival of the previous bird-sitter, a college student. At first, the two keep to themselves in a largely peaceable coexistence. The narrator's most unsettling experience takes place outside, when a man taunts her and coughs in her face, an event that underscores her "vulnerable" status. Rather than dwelling in despair, Nunez's book expands into a meditation on pain and the formation of unusual intimacies.

At Night He Lifts Weights, *by Kang Young-sook, translated from the Korean by Janet Hong (Transit)*. These stories are populated by isolated characters who exist in crumbling worlds sometimes governed by the logic of dreams. The public water supply is contaminated; foul smells infiltrate the air; a group of men with money troubles vanish all at once, leaving their wives to roam in search of them. Everywhere families are splintered, their members "turned back to the television screen, to the kitchen sink, to the phone, to the doll that babbled when you touched it." But this malaise dissolves once the characters attempt to connect, as when a woman who is separated from her husband realizes: "I wanted to tell him that now—now was the time for us to love each other."

trappings, Gleason argues, noting the shift away from New Age spirituality in favor of "ethics" and "rule-based" approaches to polyamory. These precepts were codified in "The Ethical Slut," by Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy (1997), a sex-positive guide colloquially known as "the poly bible." It contains Keristan terminology (like "compersion"—the feeling of joy that comes from seeing your partner sexually happy with another person) and a list of do's and don'ts, including "DO refrain from fucking the guests until your lover is finished cooking and serving dinner," and "DON'T wander off with your lover, leaving your partner to make conversation with your lover's spouse."

So many rules! "American Poly" reveals Americans to be very American. Good Puritans, we made marriage into work and non-monogamy into even more work—something that requires scheduling software, self-help manuals, even networking events. Presumably, participants could at least skip the icebreakers.

Halfway through "More," Molly Roden Winter's memoir about her open marriage, the author picks up a copy of "The Ethical Slut" from the Strand, "a bookstore large enough to contain the embarrassment I feel," she writes. By now, Roden Winter is writing in unstinting detail about the mechanics of her marriage's transition from monogamous to open (some sex on the side) to fully polyamorous (in which couples are allowed to have full-fledged concurrent relationships). She holds nothing back, even when she should. At one point, she signs up for AshleyMadison.com (tagline: "Life is short, have an affair") using the alias Mercedes Invierno, her surname in Spanish. "The twin sins of cultural appropriation and misrepresenting myself to men with Latina fetishes hardly seem important in the world of Ashley Madison," she tells herself, eating up the attention she receives on the site "like a warm plate of churros."

When the book opens, Roden Winter is the (monogamously) married stay-at-home mother of two small children, or, as she puts it, "the Wiper of Noses, the Doer of Dishes, the Nag in Residence." She wants, well—more. One night, after her husband, Stewart, gets home late from work, yet again, she loses it. Out on a rage walk through the mean streets of Park Slope, she bumps into an old colleague from her teaching days who invites her out to a nearby bar, appropriately named the Gate, where she will first trespass the boundaries of monogamy.

Inside, she meets Matt, a younger man who buys her a few rounds of I.P.A.s. The description of him is generic: tall, jeans, hair. Their conversation is devoid of even the slimmest fragment of witty banter. This is a lust born of deprivation and desperation. She gives Matt her number, and by the time she's home he's sent her a text message, which Stewart spies. It turns out that he's turned on. Matt becomes the couple's marital lubricant. In bed, Stewart imagines that Matt is probably somewhere "thinking about what he wishes he'd done to you," he tells his wife, before brushing his fingers across her panties. Roden Winter is riveted: " 'Fuck me' I say, for perhaps the first time in our married life."

At every turn, Roden Winter emphasizes that this experiment sustains and deepens her bond with her husband. "Sometimes, when Stewart does something new—moves his tongue differently, I freeze," she writes. "Where did he learn to do that? I wonder," she continues, before she has a powerful orgasm that recalls the early days of their courtship. Later, she goes to see "Get Out" with a man she met on OKCupid, and is breathlessly excited about decoding the film's symbolism. "And the cotton in his ears was so cool!" she recalls telling her OKCupid date. "It's like he's using this symbol of slavery to escape the enslavers." He compliments her on her insight, then grows quiet, not as eager as she imagines Stewart will be to go back and forth with "Mercedes Invierno" on race relations.

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of "More" is how closed-minded it feels about many things besides open marriage. Divorce, for instance. When the wife of one of Roden Winter's lovers leaves him for another man, she derides the woman to her therapist: "I feel bad for him. Diana is being so impulsive. I mean, she's planning on marrying this guy she met only a year ago." It's a startlingly judgmental pronouncement coming from someone who clearly thinks of herself as transgressive. But that kind of marital rupture is impossible in Roden Winter's world. While I appreciated her lack of shame about desire (including the desire for validation), I couldn't help wishing that she possessed the same candor around the economics of her marriage. Although she never directly addresses the matter in "More," it is clear from her life style that Roden Winter and her husband are better off than most of their partners, who tend to be younger, single, and less financially secure than they are. One of their rules is that they cannot have sex in their home, and so, in the course of the book they spend untold amounts on New York City hotels, taxis, and co-working spaces. When Roden Winter first hooks up with Matt, she immediately notices his cramped living space: "There's no foyer in his small studio apartment, no mudroom with four identical cubbies like I have in my house." Who thinks about a mudroom during sex? Someone who writes a book called "More" is who.

The memoir takes a long time to finish, not unlike a bad Ashley Madison hookup, but not before Roden Winter offers closing remarks in defense of open marriage. She echoes the common refrain expressed by proponents of polyamory that the life style represents an abundance-oriented mind-set, whereas monogamy is a symptom of scarcity culture. "Because love is vast," she tells us. "Abundant. Infinite, in fact. And the secret is this: love begets love. The more you love, the more love you have to give." But there is no articulation of what that abundance might look like beyond her private life and the private spaces in which it unfolds. Ultimately, Roden Winter's memoir represents a very specific, arguably very American version of polyamory—the extension of abundance culture to all corners of the bedroom, but nowhere beyond.

I want more for polyamory than "More." As ethical non-monogamy becomes the stuff of Park Slope marriages and luxury perfume ads, it's worth remembering that revolutions don't fail; they get co-opted—often by people who can afford co-ops. You can understand why Roden Winter might believe that she is ushering in a bright, abundant future by opening up her marriage. A good love affair, when you're inside it, feels like it could change the world. But changing the world takes more than spreading the love; you have to spread the wealth, too. Maybe that's just utopian, hippie nonsense. But what can I say? I'm a romantic. ♦

WINTER SUN

How Camille Pissarro went from mediocrity to magnificence.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

CAMILLE PISSARRO / ALAMY

Pissarro began as a tutor, not a talent. But in his final decade he found genius.

It's one of the stranger anomalies of French intellectual life that Impressionist painting—by far the most influential of French cultural enterprises—has received so little attention from the most ambitious French critics and philosophers. One can page through André Gide's journal entries, a lot of them on art, or through Albert Camus's, and find very little on Claude Monet or Edgar Degas (and much more on the Symbolists, a group that was far easier for a literary man to "get"). Marcel Proust cared passionately for painting, and his hero-painter Elstir has touches of Monet, but in order to make him interesting Proust had to model him on the more histrionic James McNeill Whistler, with samplings from a forgotten American painter added in.

The absence isn't that hard to explain. Impressionism, though profound, isn't philosophical. Symbolism and Surrealism have an agreeably articulate aesthetic, a body of poems, a point of view. Impressionism is mostly silent. Its implicit credo is empirical and material: there is a stubborn physicality to it—bodies and babies and wheat fields and boulevards. It does not make an argument, except in the way art does, by being art. And yet museums provide the one test that matters most, the test of the crowded room, and the most crowded remain the Impressionists', marking, as Cyril Connolly once suggested, one of the last instances of a valid myth in Western art: the Impressionist myth of bourgeois pleasure.

Among the big thinkers, the most invisible of the Impressionists is the father figure of the group, Camille Pissarro. An artist of impeccable character, he connected the group's feuding factions, became an instructor and mentor to the impossible Cézanne, welcomed Georges Seurat and took up his pointillist cause, and even remained (until the Dreyfus Affair) on good terms with the irascible Degas. Pissarro thought hard, but he thought about the nature of visual experience more than about the progress of art history, observing that winter sun is actually warmer than the summer kind—an insight that moved Monet and Alfred Sisley, and illuminates their art.

Now we have a new biography, Anka Muhlstein's "Camille Pissarro: The Audacity of Impressionism" (Other Press; translated by Adriana Hunter), which, unusually, was originally published in French (almost all the major scholarly biographies of Impressionists have been in English), and which invites us to head to the museums to look at the work again. You will find no trace in Muhlstein's book of the pioneering Anglo-American inquiries into the social history of Impressionism that, in the past half century, have so altered our understanding of the paintings, making innocent landscapes, like Monet's haystacks, shimmer with hidden monetary matters. (The haystacks were actually wheat stacks—the accumulated bullion of French agriculture.) Yet Muhlstein *is* a sympathetic chronicler of Pissarro's life, and she understands that although we may want to lift Monet or Degas up from their circle to see them individually, comparing them with masters past and masters yet to come, Pissarro belongs not only to his time but to his team. Whatever "Impressionism" means is what he means, too. As the hub of the Impressionist wheel, he is dependent on his spokes for his centering. And, however innocent Muhlstein may be of neo-Marxist art history, she has real insight to offer into the practical economics of Impressionist painting. Pissarro's relationship with his dealer,

Paul Durand-Ruel, emerges as perhaps the earliest round in the now perpetual love-hate dance between artists and dealers, with the painter first grateful for the money, then suspicious of the cut.

Pissarro was born in 1830 on the island of St. Thomas, then a Danish colony. His parents were Sephardic Jews, with a typical combination of a hyperstrong clan identity and a weak national one. He was sent to study in France at eleven, and fell in love with French culture; forced to return home six years later, he found himself desperate to get off the little island. The result was that he spent a couple of meandering years in Venezuela, not a promising place for the kind of artist he had decided he would become. Though he got back to Paris when he was twenty-five, he never felt, or was allowed to feel, fully at home there, or anywhere.

Derek Walcott once devoted a long narrative poem to Pissarro's journey from the Caribbean to the Continent, superimposed on Walcott's own later journey, and saw Pissarro's mature painting presaged in the dusty, sporadically lush landscape of the island: "the turbulent paradise of bright rotundas / over aisles of cane, and censer-carried mists, / then, blazing from the ridges of Maracas—/ the croton hues of the Impressionists." Conceivably, Pissarro would have arrived at those croton hues without his Caribbean childhood, but as a metaphor the idea is sound: Pissarro's island identity was essential to his always liminal life. He was at home only in the company of his clan—first his actual family, and then the family of the Impressionist circle. (Even his name was uncertain; trilingual, he signed his paintings in the Spanish style, as Pizarro, like the conquistador, until well into the eighteen-fifties.)

Pissarro's Jewishness, which previous writers often treated as a minor matter, is revealed in Muhlstein's biography to be genuinely encompassing. The Pissarro family, in the manner of Sephardic merchants, were cosmopolitan, equally happy to settle in London or in Paris, in the West Indies or in South America; they were also, in the grudging way of clans, mutually dependent and mutually resentful. Pissarro's mother was, true to the Jewish-mother stereotype, long-suffering and ever-complaining. She so disapproved of his marriage to her former maid, Julie Vellay, that for years she refused to speak her name. At the onset of the Franco-Prussian War, she wrote, "I beg you, my dear son, don't do anything rash—remember that I have enough sadness. . . . It's sad for me at my age to have only two sons and both of them far away, leaving me with no protector. Don't ever think we are happy and cheerful here."

If Pissarro's Jewishness could allow some in his new country to dismiss him as furtively alien, it had other consequences, too. Persecuted minorities sometimes get compensated for their persecution by a well-intentioned typecasting: having been made to seem worse than they are, they are then made to seem better than anyone can be. Just being human is never enough. And so along with the European image of the shape-shifting and deceptive Jew came the companion image of the Jew as farseeing and noble sage. When Charles Dickens crafted the Jewish criminal Fagin, he was largely unaware of his bigotry—people like Fagin were the ones he knew to lead pickpocket gangs—and then he made up for it by unduly ennobling Mr. Riah, in "Our Mutual Friend," as a reborn Biblical patriarch. Pissarro was subject to the same play. A suspect Jew in the French countryside, with prematurely white hair and a long beard, he became "Father Abraham" to his Paris friends while still a young man; his Jewishness endowed him early with a wisdom he did not yet quite possess.

Impressionism began in the eighteen-sixties under the auspices of two liberal institutions that had grown up in mid-century France, and that have continued to distinguish every art culture that descends from it: the open museum and the café. The Impressionists all met at the Louvre. The practice of open admission to the national collections had been established since the Revolution, and it wasn't terribly difficult to get a "copyist card," which allowed one into the Louvre with an easel to sketch the pictures. The budding independent painters sooner or later obtained a card—including Berthe Morisot, who was permitted to copy within the Grande Galerie when only a teen-ager. (The Impressionists welcomed women; Morisot and Mary Cassatt were more or less accepted as equals early on.) The pious thing to say is that this imprinting on the classical tradition was essential to the Impressionists' art; certainly Manet learned much from Spanish painting, and Rubens's blazing palette obviously affected Renoir. But they realized that the past had become more burden than ballast.

"Would you like to see a dessert menu or do you not need a little treat after each meal?"

Recognizing a crisis in art is the beginning of solving it. The young painters left the Louvre to drink and argue over what was to be done, and the cafés gave them places to do so. The Café Guerbois, on Grande Rue de Batignolles, became the favorite. Sisley, Renoir, Degas, Cézanne, and Fantin-Latour would share a nightcap there, with Zola on hand to take notes. It is not the least of art-historical ironies that the crucial intellectual steps toward bright, open-air country painting in the sunny suburbs all took place at night in crowded and smoky Paris cafés.

Yet these artists, having found themselves as a group in the café, became tested as a group only in exile. In 1870 and 1871, during and after the Franco-Prussian War and the bloody assault on the Paris Commune, many painters who could get out of France did so. (Manet stayed, making cool records of the massacre of the Communards.) Pissarro, whose official citizenship was Danish, exempting him from the mandatory Army service that French citizens were subject to, fled to England with Julie, joining Monet, Sisley, and the more academic Impressionist James Tissot. It was as if they were unconsciously creating in London the experience that generations of English and American painters would find in Paris: they remade their art in shared exile.

During those London years, two things happened that would fuel all the rest. First, as Pissarro would emphasize, the painters were exposed to the late work of J. M. W. Turner, the oils and watercolors both. Turner's nearly abstract but always high-keyed red and gold and violet landscapes fired the liberation of color that was integral to the Impressionist enterprise. Bright color had effectively been banished from painting for more than two centuries, as an enemy of form; the outdoor paintings of the so-called Barbizon school tended to be depressingly dark. But Turner used color in ways that were idiosyncratic to him and had been invisible in France. Subsequent commentators underplayed this crucial bridge between London and Paris, in part because it interpolates a Romantic element into the evolution of Impressionism, which sits uneasily with the simpler story of the painter in dialogue with nature. It mattered little that Turner's color arose from Romantic rhapsody rather than from empirical investigation; in Pissarro's reckoning, Turner was "perhaps the first who knew how to make colors blaze with a natural brilliance."

Second, in a way that was just as important although more prosaic, the London exile saw the emergence of Paul Durand-Ruel as possibly the first entirely modern art dealer. The heir of an established Paris gallery, he had arrived in London as another escapee. He wasn't at first in sympathy with the Impressionists, but he came to see that something new was happening here, which could be bought cheap and might be sold dear. He effectively signed up the whole cast, including Pissarro, and offered them advances. This provided the fuel on which Impressionism later came to New York and Chicago, where Durand-Ruel cultivated the new class of millionaires; he would make the French painters, in time, wealthy men. Right away, he bought a Pissarro for more than Pissarro had ever made from a picture. Pissarro, by then a family man with three kids, used the money from selling his art to pay the grocer.

The Paris these painters returned to was not an inviting place in which to try to make a new art of warm light and bright color. The first Impressionist exhibition was held in 1874, on one of the boulevards barricaded during the assault on the Commune. Indeed, with the ruins of the Tuileries Palace smoldering in the center of Paris, making such an art might have seemed impossible. But anyone who rummages around in European social history recognizes how everything changed in the eighteen-seventies. The historian of Christmas, for instance, sees that although the idea of the secularized Christmas, the festival of abundance, had been in embryo since the onset of the Industrial Revolution, it really blossomed only in this decade, when department-store windows and Santas first appeared, in an explosion of surplus goods, paper, and tinsel. Indeed, the economist J. Bradford DeLong has made a convincing case that the seventies were the "historical axis" for the wheel of economic modernity, a time when the first Industrial Revolution gave way to the second Industrial Revolution of modern technology and globalization. Standards of living then began a precipitous climb that would continue, despite everything, for the next century and a half. The genius of the Impressionists, and of Pissarro, their moral leader, was to intuit that the city rising before them had a much more broadly based prosperity than any before, and that their role as social radicals and their role as singers of the daily scene might be one.

Before that decade, few people had anything; after, nearly everybody had something. Seemingly chocolate-box pictures like Renoir's "Bal du Moulin de la Galette" or his pair of paintings set at the outdoor Restaurant Fournaise—places that are now stuck in our heads as paradisiacal images of ideal urban life—are really pictures of the working class. These are the people who supported the Communards and voted for radicals in the national assembly, but they are not about to be deprived of a good time by politics or repression. The Impressionists saw this before anyone else, as artists will. Just as Pop artists in isolation around 1962 saw the coming media world—they envisioned the comic-book dystopia we live in now when three-channel, black-and-white television was the norm—the Impressionists grasped from the beginning the emergence of a rising consumer culture, and they chose to chronicle it.

What little prose writing there is that's associated with Impressionism gives a misleading sense of its ambitions. Baudelaire's beloved essay "The Painter of Modern Life," for instance, suggests the role of the painter as flâneur, making images of the modern city in the way the roving street photographer Cartier-Bresson later did. But Baudelaire's is a purely literary project, and the painters, including even Manet, his supposed model, would actually return again and again to single subjects: a nude in the bath, a plate of asparagus, a haystack. The obsessive series is their sonnet form.

Pissarro had already seized on a quieter and subtler subject than his fellows did—the remaking of the Paris countryside by modernity, or, to put it more baldly, the processes of suburbanization. Unable to afford Parisian prices, he had moved with his family to the unprepossessing suburb of Pontoise and painted what he saw there. Most of his Pontoise pictures have a remarkably uniform structure: a long perspective road cuts through a fairly monochromatic French countryside, all pastel

greens. It is defiantly not an ancient country lane but a new kind of road, meant for carts and interrupted by train crossings.

In a sequence of quietly seminal paintings from 1873, he even shows us a factory along the river near Pontoise. These landscapes are neither editorial comment nor encomium—just an understated, surprised encounter with modernity. The Pontoise works are certainly not a protest against the industrialization of the countryside—the smoke that wafts from the factory chimneys is as chromatically pleasing as the river below them, and the three chimneys reflect in the water as equably as poplars do in Monet. Pissarro puns, in fact, on the resemblance of the smokestacks, atmospherically softened, to the poplar trees rising to their right, the made and the natural evened out by light. One world, united by an eye, is what you see when you walk outside, the painting says. The commitment to what is, not what was or what ought to be, is the politics of this picture. (The factory, perhaps not incidentally, distilled sugar beets into alcohol for liqueurs—not unlike the sugarcane distilleries he would have known as a boy on St. Thomas.)

Around this time, too, life within the Pontoise house and garden became his other favorite subject. His portraits of his daughter Minette, from 1872, are perhaps the best portraits of a child since those of the early German Romantic Philipp Otto Runge. The wise child is one of the central modernist inventions of the eighteen-sixties and seventies—it is, after all, the period of Alice and her looking glass—and Minette looks out at us as a French Alice: in higher fashion, but also in equal parts intelligent and sensitive, a small girl in that odd moment of young girls who, while dressed in ways that seem overmature, grace it by a second, inner maturity of their own. The wise children of John Singer Sargent and Cecilia Beaux begin here. (If you look closely, you can see the circles under Minette's eyes; she had fallen ill, and died two years later, leaving her father brokenhearted.)

Pissarro's own painting from the eighteen-seventies can sometimes look undernourished, drained of even the most conventional pictorial drama. Yet his persistent sublimation of experience into sensation proved to be the catalyst for the most advanced leap any of the Impressionists would take. This occurred in his long and gentle mentoring of Paul Cézanne, in the seventies—the work of guiding and guarding that would make him "Father Abraham."

Cézanne at the time was a hard painter to love and an even harder man to like. A rich kid from the provinces, he tried, in a familiar pattern, to cover up his roots with an elaborate show of bohemian bad manners. He made a point of being rude to people who intimidated him, in a tiresome thank-God-I'm-a-country-boy act. When Cézanne entered the Café Guerbois, he always "kept his pants up with a red belt, like a workman," and "would cast a wary eye around the group," Monet recalled. (Manet, instinctively elegant, stayed out of the Impressionist shows in part to avoid having to be in the same room as Cézanne.)

Cézanne's pictures then were proto-Expressionist ham-handed images of violence and disturbance. When he retreated from Paris to Provence, in the late eighteen-sixties, he was universally judged, even by his best friend, Zola, a failure. But Pissarro, who was almost a decade older, understood that the man's bearishness masked his extraordinary sensitivity. Like Pissarro, Cézanne had a genius for visual inquiry without having a particular talent for painting. Pissarro took him under his wing and painted with him, step by step over several years, tenderly compelling him, by his own patient example, to work out his artistic agony in a simple grid of marks and repeated touches that would re-create the world. Terra-cotta roof by ochre wall by chartreuse meadow, Pissarro slowed Cézanne's hand and forced his attention toward the inner details. Painted side by side, the telegraphic abbreviations of Pissarro and Cézanne become difficult to tell apart. Pissarro taught him how to sublimate erotic anxiety into sensual apprehension—the endless bosoms that the sexually overwrought Cézanne scribbled became sublimated into apples. Cézanne's example then taught the Cubists how to do it, and the Cubists then taught us. It was one of the basic advances of modern vision.

Pissarro never gave up the role of tutor, uniquely open to new talent: when Seurat arrived in the next decade with his system of dots, he disgusted Degas and Monet, who thought that escaping from pseudo-academic systems was the whole idea of being an Impressionist. Pissarro grasped that the system was secondary to the sensuality, the ability to crystallize sensation into specific chromatic atoms. Not only did he welcome Seurat but for a while he humbly remade his own style after the younger painter's. Julie was vexed: "You did some pointillism, then you stopped doing it. Why? Either it was good or it wasn't." Pissarro even saw the special virtues of Vincent van Gogh. (Theo van Gogh once tried to send his brother to live with the Pissarros; Camille, recognizing that Vincent was a great genius and a terrible house guest, passed him on to Dr. Gachet, who became the subject of the artist's greatest portrait.)

One doesn't want to overstate Pissarro's place. Though he was in the first rank of people, he was never in the first rank of artists. At the Met, you cross into a Monet room and are dazzled by the perfection of tone; you walk over to the van Gogh cypresses and are stunned, anew, to see ordinary nature remade as hallucination. For the most part, Pissarro only holds his own.

Until his final decade, that is. In art, late styles tend to distill all that came before. Pissarro is the rare exception. Many artists—Titian and de Kooning alike—have found a second childhood in old age; no other painter ever became younger in his sixties. In the eighteen-nineties, with a certain amount of wealth and fame (Durand-Ruel's audacious opening of a gallery in New York had been an enormous success), Pissarro rented a studio on the fourth floor of the Grand Hôtel du Louvre. Looking down on the streets and on the Tuileries gardens across from the hotel, he finally possessed a subject uniquely his own. "I'm delighted to have a chance to try painting these Paris streets," he wrote to his son Lucien, who was also an artist. They were the kind, he went on, that "people usually say are ugly, but which are so silvery, so full of light and life, completely different from the boulevards—it's just so modern!" (The way he distinguished these streets from the slightly more northern Haussmannian boulevards is typical of a city dweller;

New Yorkers see SoHo and Chelsea as atmospheric opposites, where others see them as much of a muchness.)

Though the Impressionists had occasionally tried their hand at a view of the new streets from above—notably Monet in his flag-waving Bastille Day picture—none had made it the subject of dogged inquiry. But Pissarro chose to paint the Tuileries gardens, once the site of so much violence, from a detached but not disillusioned eye-in-the-sky view, in the winter light he loved. He was taken not by the explosion of festive color on the streets he saw below but by the quick, nervous, antlike movement of people around and across the pavements and gardens. Where Seurat had sought a kind of monumentality in the friezelike depictions of ordinary people in a park, Pissarro did just the opposite: he took advantage of the overhead view to miniaturize his Parisians, turn them into tiny flickering dots spread out and activated across the entire picture so that, democratically, no one form or incident took precedence over another.

It used to be said that these were the first "all over" pictures, anticipating by half a century Jackson Pollock's discovery of the hypnotic power of a picture in which the center doesn't matter more than the edge. The picture plane in these late city views is flattened in a prescient way, squashed and compressed—so much so that the Basilica of St. Clotilde, with its twin mock-Gothic towers, is always present in the background, though it is in fact all the way across the Seine, on the Left Bank. But there are advances in the small scale as well as in the large. Pissarro, so often merely genial before, becomes a quietly virtuosic painter in these last pictures. The little daubs that represent passersby are miracles of characterization. Though hardly larger than a fingertip, they show a world as avidly detailed as Proust's: society women out for a stroll with other society women; lonely spinsters walking their dogs; a small boy in a smock playing with a hoop in the shade of a tree.

Pissarro's final decade was dominated by the Dreyfus Affair, in which he took a leading role, losing the friendship of the reactionary anti-Dreyfusards Degas and Renoir along the way. He was reminded that, however little a Jew he might be, a Jew he nonetheless remained. Yet on the whole his last years—he was seventy-three when he died, in 1903—were serene and productive in ways that few aging artists have known. (His one unfulfilled dream was to have a "Pissarro family exhibition" with his children, all of whom, girls and boys alike, he encouraged to become artists.) Muhlstein quotes the later reflections of the critic Thadée Natanson: "Is it because he was infallible? Because he was infinitely just and infinitely good? Or because his prominent nose was hooked, and his beard very white and very long? But for those who knew him during the 90s, he really was something like a kindly God."

In the end, what we, too, love most in Pissarro is his character, and to say this is not to condescend to his painting. We know him *through* his seemingly observational works. People disclose their personalities through the pursuit of pleasure more tellingly than they do through the pursuit of novelty, and this is why we love the Impressionists and crowd their rooms: almost uniquely, we can know them so well as people. Degas was peevish and intelligent; Renoir benevolent but not brighter than he had to be; Manet elusive and coolly contradictory in manner. We need only look at a single canvas of van Gogh's to know his energy and his tragedy, and at one canvas of Pissarro's to grasp his honesty. Choosing an art that on the surface denied the expression of personality, these painters ended up being so invested in the picture-making manner that they could not disguise themselves from themselves.

Of them all, Pissarro, though the least immediately impressive, offers a singularly radiant kind of diligence. We look up from the Tuileries today at the hotel window, and see him seeing us. A mixed-up Jewish kid, an islander who wanted to get to Paris to paint, he ended as the patron saint of December light. The winter sun still shines in his last paintings, just as warm as he had known it would be. ♦

"There's no easy way to say this, so I'll send it to your patient portal when I'm on vacation."

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A CRITIC AT LARGE

GENGHIS THE GOOD

Nomadic warriors like the Mongol hordes, scholars argue, built our world.

BY MANVIR SINGH

History's "global turn" was meant to transcend the old ethnocentrisms.

In September, Pope Francis became the first leader of the Catholic Church ever to visit Mongolia. It must have been a humbling stopover. The country has fewer than fifteen hundred Catholics. The welcoming ceremony, in Ulaanbaatar's main square, attracted a few hundred spectators—a crowd less than a thousandth the size of one that had gathered to see him in Lisbon a month earlier. One of the attendees had come out to do his morning Tai Chi and unknowingly ended up at the event.

Not everyone understood why the Pontiff was there. A caterer at a banquet for the Vatican entourage asked a *Times* reporter, "What are Catholics again?" But the Pope came prepared. Speaking to diplomats, cultural leaders, and the Mongolian President, he celebrated the religious freedom protected under the Mongol Empire during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—"the remarkable ability of your ancestors to acknowledge the outstanding qualities of the peoples present in its immense territory and to put those qualities at the service of a common development." He also celebrated "the Pax Mongolica," the period of Mongol-enforced stability across Eurasia, citing its "absence of conflicts" and respect "of international laws."

Many earlier Christians would have been staggered by Francis's words. The first recorded mention of the Mongols in Western Europe is from a Benedictine monk who, in 1240, recorded testimony that the Mongols were "an immense horde of that detestable race of Satan . . . thirsting after and drinking blood, and tearing and devouring the flesh of dogs and human beings." Five years later, Pope Innocent IV sent Güyük Khan, the third leader of the Mongol Empire, a letter expressing "our amazement" that the Mongols "have invaded many countries belonging to both Christians and to others and are laying them waste in a horrible desolation."

Muslims, too, saw the Mongols as bloodthirsty savages. When Hulagu Khan stormed Baghdad, in 1258, bodies were heaped on the streets; drains reportedly ran red in the heart of Muslim civilization, while Baghdad's great library, the House of Wisdom, burned. For many historians, the sacking marked the end of five centuries of cultural and scientific flourishing—the Islamic Golden Age. In November, 2002, Osama bin Laden claimed that George H. W. Bush's Administration had been more destructive than "Hulagu of the Mongols." Months later, in the run-up to the Iraq War, Saddam Hussein referred to the United States and its allies as "the Mongols of this age."

The image of Mongols as brutes outlasted their conquests. In a Voltaire play, they appear as "wild sons of rapine" who set out to "make this splendid seat of empire one vast desert, like their own." Today, the name of the empire's founder remains so tied to tyranny and fanaticism that it's become a cliché to describe politicians as "somewhere to the right of Genghis Khan." In Russia and Eastern Europe, the "Mongol-Tatar yoke" denotes not just the period of Mongol rule but also other forms of despotism; days after Francis's comments, the Ukrainian political consultant Aleksandr Kharebin used the phrase to describe Putin's Russia.

But Pope Francis was far from alone in challenging the old tropes. "We have too readily accepted the stereotype of supremely violent Mongols who conquered much of Eurasia with stunning ease," Marie Favereau writes in "The Horde: How the Mongols Changed the World" (Harvard). Her work joins other recent volumes—Kenneth W. Harl's "Empires of the Steppes: A History of the Nomadic Tribes Who Shaped Civilization" (Hanover Square), Anthony Sattin's "Nomads: The Wanderers Who Shaped Our World" (Norton), and Nicholas Morton's "The Mongol Storm: Making and Breaking Empires in the Medieval Near East" (Basic)—in a decades-long effort to overhaul narratives about the barbarity of the nomad, and especially Mongols. These works advance a kind of steppe restoration. Instead of blood-drunk man-beasts, we meet crafty administrators who supported debate, commerce, and religious freedom. Yes, they overran cities, but state formation often demanded it. And, yes, they enslaved, but so did lots of societies, and many were much crueller.

The steppe restoration typifies what historians call the global turn, a larger project of shifting histories away from nation-states and colonialist defamation and toward the peoples and processes that have knotted us together. It's a survey of shadows, a tracing of negative space. It focusses on peoples who, in Sattin's words, "have long been confined to the

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anecdotes and afterthoughts of our writers and histories." These are some of the most maligned groups in historical chronicles: the uncivilized; the barbarians at the gate; the tribes who seem to appear from some demonic portal, destroy everything in sight, and then recede back into darkness. The steppe restoration repositions them. It treats them as subjects in their own right—as peoples who have their own histories, who formed societies no less complex than the sedentary states they confronted, and who helped craft the world we inhabit.

The Eurasian steppe is a vast curtain of grassland that stretches from Hungary to Manchuria. Its size is almost impossible to fathom: a vista of green and tan whose termini are farther from each other than Anchorage is from Miami or Cairo is from Johannesburg. Its historical significance derives from a curious quadruped that has lived there for roughly a hundred thousand years: the horse. Long-legged, with powerful lungs, elastic tendons, and a gut capable of digesting tough grass, the creature thrives on the open steppe. Horses were well equipped to weather the Ice Age, their hard hoofs able to break through snow and ice to expose grasses underneath.

"The horse has been the most efficient and enduring means of transport humans have ever used," Sattin, a British journalist, writes in "Nomads," "and the ability to ride a horse transformed life on earth, perhaps nowhere more so than on the steppe." Horses were bred in captivity on the western steppe at least five thousand years ago. The wheel was invented around the same time, and the two innovations, combined, allowed nomadic pastoralism to flourish.

The people of the Yamnaya culture were the first to take advantage of the new technologies and dominate much of the steppe. Starting north of the Black Sea about 3000 B.C., they used horses and wheeled carts to traverse astounding distances; geneticists have found second cousins buried almost nine hundred miles away from each other. They and their descendants also spilled into Europe, India, the Near East, and western China, as Harl, a professor emeritus of history at Tulane, recounts at the beginning of "Empires of the Steppes." The Yamnaya tongue is one of the earliest offshoots of Proto-Indo-European, and an ancestor of such languages as Greek, German, English, Spanish, Old Celtic, Russian, Persian, Hindi, and Bengali. (Today, more than three billion people speak an Indo-European language.) Roughly seventy per cent of us have some Yamnaya ancestry in our DNA. More than the Greeks, the Romans, or the Chinese, it's the nomadic Yamnaya whose legacy survives in our words and our bodies.

In the millennia after the Yamnaya expansion, the makeup of the Eurasian steppe changed. By the seventh century B.C., a people known as the Scythians occupied the western end. The Scythians—whose mounted archers wielded composite bows and rode on saddles with leather toe-loop stirrups—controlled much of the steppelands between the Black and the Caspian Seas. They also helped bring down the Assyrian Empire and, according to Herodotus, twice defeated the King of Persia. Travel to the eastern steppes and jump forward a couple of centuries, to around 200 B.C., and you find the Xiongnu, who for a period collected payment from Han China in exchange for peace.

As with so many steppe nomads, much of what we know about the Scythians and the Xiongnu comes from what sedentary people wrote about them. (Sattin tells us that the name Xiongnu derives from a Chinese word meaning "illegitimate offspring of slaves.") Harl and Sattin combine these accounts with newer genetic and archeological evidence to construct a richer story. Both the Scythians and the Xiongnu, it turns out, were multiethnic confederations. The Xiongnu encompassed a range of tribes across a stretch of steppe about as wide as the continental United States. Under the leadership of a charismatic ruler named Modu Chanyu, they established a complex governing apparatus, complete with Chinese scribes, a bureaucratic hierarchy, and, according to Harl, their own system of writing. "In constructing the first imperial order on the steppes, Modu Chanyu wrote the script for subsequent steppe conquerors from Attila the Hun to Genghis Khan," Harl writes.

Among the nomads covered in "Empires of the Steppes," Harl is most impressed by Genghis Khan and his Mongols. Attila the Hun helped bring down the Western Roman Empire, while campaigns by the later conqueror Tamerlane helped propel the rise of Mughal India, Muscovite Russia, and Shiite Safavid Iran. But the steppe-straddling superpower established by Genghis Khan was uniquely long-lived and expansive. It was through the Mongol Empire, Harl writes, that papermaking, block printing, and gunpowder moved from the East to the West, hastening the spread of knowledge and catalyzing Europe's conquest of the seas. "The global economy of the modern age was thus born thanks to the Mongol legacy," he declares.

The idea that the Mongols were the architects of modernity is a mainstay of the new scholarship. Sattin presents an argument similar to Harl's, adding the compass to the list of innovations sent westward, although he acknowledges that other nomads, such as the Arabs, helped deliver them to Europeans. Both authors are able to draw upon such earlier work as the anthropologist Jack Weatherford's "Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World" (2004), a charming, poetic, and laudatory introduction to the Mongols that, more than any other book, helped advance the steppe restoration.

All these chroniclers tell a similar story of the Mongols' ascent. A modest, resourceful, and sometimes ruthless hunter-nomad named Temujin, having been abandoned by his clan as a nine-year-old, united the tribes of the eastern steppes for the first time in four centuries. In 1206, at a gathering of steppe leaders, he was bequeathed the title Chinggis Khan, which means something like "fierce" or "oceanic" ruler. (The English "Genghis" comes from translations of Persian sources.) In the next two decades, he and his followers became the first to bring under one dominion the lands between the Caspian Sea and the Pacific Ocean, an area nearly as wide as the steppe itself.

After his death, in 1227, Genghis Khan's domain continued to swell until it covered some twenty per cent of the world's landmass, from Syria to Korea. In the east, his son Ogedei subdued northern China. When Kublai Khan, Genghis' grandson, overtook the south, he unified the country and founded the Yuan dynasty. The events of the west, meanwhile, feature in Morton's "The Mongol Storm" and Favereau's "The Horde."

Both books are remarkable scholarly achievements, and the range of sources

their authors consult is a testament to Mongol cosmopolitanism. Morton, a historian at Nottingham Trent University, focusses on the realm between the Nile Delta and Anatolia, where Mongols schemed with and against caliphs, crusaders, and Turkish commanders. Favereau, a historian at Paris Nanterre University, tells the story of the Golden Horde, which started in the northwestern sector of the Mongol Empire and, following its breakup, became an autonomous polity that spanned much of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

For Morton, the Mongol invasions were a localized force majeure. Just as an asteroid killed off non-avian dinosaurs and inaugurated the age of mammals, the Mongols set off a firestorm in the eastern Mediterranean that consumed contenders such as the Crusader states, the Abbasid Caliphate, and the Ayyubid Empire, creating openings for upstarts including the Mamluks of Egypt and the Ottomans of Asia Minor, both groups themselves descendants of steppe peoples.

Favereau prefers a grander framing, as is suggested by her subtitle, "How the Mongols Changed the World." The locations and the peoples she lists as examples of this world-changing, however, seem more Warsaw Pact than League of Nations. She returns most often to the Rus', the cultural ancestors of modern Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. The Mongol campaign against the Rus' lasted four winters, from 1237 to 1241. No more than fifty thousand soldiers were sent to conquer a population in the millions. To do so, the Mongols exploited their opponents' weaknesses. The Rus' state had become fragmented, beset by quarrelling among its princes. By attacking in the cold months, the Mongols surprised the Rus', who didn't expect to go to war that time of year. The Mongols adapted Chinese siege technology to flatten earthen and wooden walls. By the campaign's end, the Mongols controlled some twenty Rus' cities. Many, including the old capital, Kyiv, had been sacked. Most capitulated within days.

A common story of Mongol rule, especially in Russian nationalist scholarship, is of punishing subjugation—of an alien people whose yoke strangled development. Favereau argues otherwise. "The Russian principalities experienced extraordinary economic vitality during their vassalage to the Horde," she writes, pointing to forty or more cities built in northeastern Russia in the fourteenth century. She acknowledges that the Mongols saw the Rus' as sources of revenue, but she contends that their strategy was more commercial than repressive. The Mongols connected the Rus', directly or indirectly, to markets in the regions of the Volga River and the Caspian, the Black, and the Baltic Seas, along with China, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. "Security and free passage for merchants and goods; privileged treatment for elites, clergy, traders, and artisans; carefully planned tax and land regimes; and mostly indirect governance were the stuff of prosperity, for Russian subjects and Mongols alike," she writes. Far from slowing Russia's growth, Mongol policies may have helped bankroll it.

The steppe restoration shows the strengths—and the limitations—of the resplendent new discipline of "global history." Often said to have begun around the start of the twenty-first century, this approach emerged amid the excitement of a commerce-connected, borderless world. In 2005, Thomas Friedman published his treatise of globalization, "The World Is Flat." The next year, three academics started *The Journal of Global History*. Writing in the first issue, the British historian Patrick O'Brien declared that global history aimed to leave behind "the arrogance of Rome" as well as "the scientific and technological triumphalism of the West." Rather than building stories around the greatness of Europe (or of the Caliphate, or Confucianism), he advocated for a study of "connexions" and "comparisons" that would also spotlight "the manifold achievements of more peoples, communities, and cultures over long spans of human history."

The emerging discipline had to overcome centuries of historiographic hubris. Writing about other peoples has long been in service of self-glorification. Herodotus' "Histories," penned around 430 B.C., covered events on three continents yet culminated with displays of Greek superiority, celebrating the victories of free Greek city-states over the autocratic, barbarian Persians. Chinese dynastic histories like "History of the Han" (111 A.D.) and the "New Tang History" (1060 A.D.) endorsed a Sinocentric ideology. Foreign populations were considered civilized to the extent that they adopted Chinese norms. The ninth-century Arab scholar Ya'qubi started his history of the world with Iraq, "because it is the center of the world, the navel of the earth," and though he wrote of the great pre-Islamic powers—Persia, Byzantium, and more—it was in order to show how they contributed to the greatest polity of all: the Baghdad-based Abbasid Caliphate.

European imperialism shook everything up. As Western powers barged into people's political and psychological worlds, a plethora of ethnocentrisms gave way to Eurocentrism. Histories in Japan, China, India, Africa, and the Middle East were forced to contend with the West's achievements. The preoccupation was most extreme, naturally, in writings by Europeans. In "Lectures on the Philosophy of History" (1837), Hegel declared that "world history travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of history, and Asia the beginning." From 1893 to 1901, the French historians Ernest Lavisse and Alfred Rambaud edited a twelve-volume series, "Histoire Générale"; only ten per cent of its pages were devoted to the non-Western world.

More than a century later, the geographical scopes of world histories have expanded, yet the West's success remains the grand outcome worth explaining. Ambitious books like Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs, and Steel" (1997), Niall Ferguson's "Civilization: The West and the Rest" (2011), and Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's "Why Nations Fail" (2012) all seriously consider non-Western societies, but with the goal of expounding, to quote the title of another popular book, by Ian Morris, "Why the West Rules—for Now."

Global history was supposed to transcend all such forms of parochialism, and this goal, at first, seems realized in the

steppe restoration. The nomads, we are told, created cities, enforced peace, and guaranteed religious freedom. They encouraged trade and cultural interaction, recombining ideas, peoples, and technologies—with world-shaking consequences.

Yet a paradox runs through these books. Steppe peoples are most noteworthy, they seem to assure us, when they look like rich, settled societies. They have a role in "world history" insofar as they affect the rise and fall of sedentary, often European, polities. And so the steppe restoration ends up affirming the standards it set out to challenge.

Consider how historical significance is determined. Scholars routinely scoff at Hegel's comment that history ended in the West, and yet the steppe restoration shows just how ingrained the notion remains. Favereau and Harl spent years unearthing the stories of steppe peoples. Favereau nevertheless centers her analysis on Europe; Harl ends on it. Sattin, in his introduction, caps a list of the ways nomads created the "great empires" with their contribution to the European Renaissance. In the book's final chapter, he ends a summary of the work by citing the Renaissance and the West's domination and commercialization of the world. Even global histories, it seems, find their epilogues in Europe.

And so it goes. Contrary to the claim that the Scythians and the Xiongnu "were primitive and isolated," Sattin writes, "we know from burials that their leaders dressed in Chinese silk robes trimmed with cheetah fur, sat on Persian carpets, used Roman glass and had a taste for Greek gold and silver jewellery." Harl similarly assures us that the nomads who conquered Hellenic cities "quickly appreciated" the high Greek culture they encountered. It's all well meant, but, like the historiography of yore, these passages reinforce a hierarchy of civilizations, in which the Greeks, the Romans, the Persians, and the Chinese stand at the apex. The way you cease to be barbaric is by trading with these people or embracing their culture, and not through carrying on your own traditions.

The new global history has eagerly set out to establish that steppe nomads displayed key features of classic civilizations and liberal democracies—writing, urbanization, and apparently progressive values. But as long as these advances are considered signs of sophistication, nomads will come up short. Harl says that the Xiongnu developed a new script, but, unlike the writing of their Han neighbors, no widely accepted remnant survives. Mongols built cities, yet those cities were famously disappointing by sedentary standards; the Franciscan missionary William of Rubruck remarked that the empire's capital, Karakorum, was "not as large as the village of Saint Denis, and the monastery of Saint Denis is worth ten times more than that palace." And, yes, Genghis Khan permitted some degree of religious freedom, but Mongols who maintained their shamanistic faith naturally deemed all other creeds inferior to their own.

Global history's professed aim of decentering world history requires a more sophisticated grasp of what sophistication looks like. In the case of nomadic societies, we need to shift our orientation from the static to the flexible, from social complexity embodied in brick and bureaucracies to something that dwells within networks: an ever-responsive capacity for large-scale collective action. What made nomads impressive, after all, is what made them unique. They lived in enormous, travelling societies. They subsumed diverse ethnic groups and could mobilize for war almost instantly. They overran the empires at their borders and ruled over them, sometimes for generations. Mongol organization reached its pinnacle in those hordes—self-sufficient, mobile units that contained as many as a hundred thousand people and that transported homes, statues, workshops, palaces, and supply lines. Through settled eyes, we might call these "moving cities," yet the phrase misses their almost aqueous nature, their ability to restructure around births, departures, and political scuffles.

Historians have worked to show that, in Sattin's words, "the nomad story is neither less wonderful nor less significant than ours." But we'll still be treating ourselves as the measure of everything unless we learn to revise our sense of significance. This may be the greatest gift a more global history offers us: greatness redefined. ♦

"I'm just a boy standing in front of a girl while she's trying to complete a task."

• •

THE THEATRE

DIVIDED HOUSE

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's "Appropriate" comes to Broadway.

BY HELEN SHAW

In "Appropriate," now on Broadway at the Hayes, directed by Lila Neugebauer, the prologue is just a sound. In total darkness, we hear the metallic waterfall song of a billion cicadas, a nightmarishly amplified version of the insects' ancient mating call. According to the playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's stage directions, the noise's "pulsing, pitch black waves" should last long enough for the audience to wonder, Is this the whole show? It's the sound of a thirteen-year cycle ending; it could be the sound of the Cenozoic waking up.

Slowly, the curtain rises on the double-height entrance hall and parlor of an imposing nineteenth-century plantation home, crumbling a little and crammed with furniture, boxes, lamps, and teetering piles. In the course of the ensuing two hours and forty minutes, we sometimes forget the frightening, singing swarm that greeted us in the dark. (Bray Poor and Will Pickens did the sound design; Jane Cox designed the lights.) The creatures *in* the house are mostly human: the fractious siblings Toni (Sarah Paulson), Bo (Corey Stoll), and prodigal Frank (Michael Esper), and their respective loved ones, assessing their moral and material inheritance. The father of the siblings, who has recently died, kept a cluttered house, which must be organized for an estate and property sale, and the eldest of them, Toni, played by Paulson as tightly as a twanging bowstring, has fired the company that was meant to help.

In the play, Sarah Paulson and Corey Stoll play warring siblings.

Jacobs-Jenkins, a MacArthur Fellow and a Pulitzer finalist, changes genre each time he writes: he was a postmodern provocateur with the Obie Award-winning "An Octoroon"; a gallows satirist with the workplace thriller "Gloria"; and a contemporizer of fifteenth-century Christian allegory with "Everybody." Here, he's an American realist, or, more accurately, a pasticheur of American realists such as Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. Realism in this style of family-revelation play can be just another disguise for melodrama, so we also see that older, broader form peeking through: a plot that hinges on secrets that are revealed *almost* too late, and a lightning-stark ethical landscape in which sin is met with fitting, if delayed, punishment.

At the center of "Appropriate"—a title that, depending on how you say it, might mean "suitable" or might mean "to take possession of"—is a grim heirloom. While sorting through the house's contents, Bo's children, thirteen-year-old Cassidy (Alyssa Emily Marvin) and Ainsley (a young boy played by alternating actors; I saw Lincoln Cohen), find an album filled with photographs of dead Black men, victims of lynching. (The fact that, above an archway, the set design, by a collective named dots, includes a peeling fresco of a tree takes on terrible significance.)

The older siblings stake out their positions. Toni, staunchly loyal, refuses to believe that her father would have known about, let alone owned, such pictures; cash-strapped Bo, who has been passively aware of his dad's racism and antisemitism over the years, arranges to have them appraised (there are buyers even for stuff like this, he says, approvingly); Frank, a former drug addict who is slippery and self-serving in his half-made recovery, sees them as a prop for his own healing. Tellingly, the youngest members of the family, like Cassidy and Rhys (Graham Campbell), Toni's older teen-age son, handle the pictures with total ease, flipping through them before bed, stuffing them into pockets. The cousins also discuss the cicadas and their cyclical emergence, which reminds the

ILLUSTRATION BY XIAO HUA YANG

audience of the life teeming under the earth. Nothing likes to stay buried.

The play isn't subtle in presenting its allegory of national racial dysfunction—the white family's self-absorption in the face of Black suffering, and their swift move to commodify it—but Jacobs-Jenkins's dramatic machinery is often immensely effective. His second act is defter and faster, in fact, than the first time I saw it, in 2014, in an Obie-winning Off Broadway production at the Signature.

Some of the added drive comes from a sly use of star casting. Natalie Gold plays Rachael, Bo's harried wife, and Gold's other recent role, as the ex-wife of Kendall Roy, on "Succession," clings to her character here like a shadow. There are echoes, too, in this huge, haunted house, of Paulson's much lauded work on "Ratched" and "American Horror Story," and of Stoll's performance as a sneaky billionaire on "Billions." All three are associated with certain pulpy portraits of American rot, which adds an extra valence to the allegory. This character-by-association trick also works for Elle Fanning, who plays Frank's twenty-three-year-old fiancée and hippie-dippie enabling sprite, River. From her first entrance, River has the air of a Machiavel, charged with the afterimage of Fanning's role as Empress Catherine in "The Great." These actors' television fame adds a whisper of remembered prurience here, a flavor of kitsch there. The sense that we're watching a Peak TV supergroup underscores our culture's soap-operafication of long-standing systems of erasure, racial misprision, and guilt.

Whether or not the casting introduces an element of kitsch, Neugebauer, a precision director, doesn't stylize her actors' performances, leaning instead into their extraordinary gifts for naturalism—particularly in the sweet-dreadful mother-and-son scenes between Paulson and Campbell. Paulson's prowling, muscular performance, whether she's on the attack or on the defense, alone or in company, sets the show's tenor. Toni realizes in one hellish moment that she has held both her brothers as babies, whatever abuse their adult selves are hurling at her now. "There's no one alive who's held me," she says. "There's no one left in this family—in this whole world—who could have told me about the whole me—the me before I became . . . this." Toni is bitter, unappreciated, confused, defeated from the first moment. But, whenever Paulson left the stage, I found myself parking a bit of my attention by whichever door she'd just walked through. Our animal brains still clock the direction from which danger might approach.

If the play has a theatrical parent, it might be Sam Shepard's "Buried Child," or Williams's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," another drama that takes place in a Southern plantation house full of estranged brothers and sisters-in-law who claw at one another. The play's theatrical sibling, on the other hand, is the playwright's own "An Octoroon." Jacobs-Jenkins worked on both plays while he was living in Germany, where he explored a clinical perspective on the United States, and both had New York premières the same year. The plays are twins, if fraternal: they share an interest, for instance, in lynching photographs. In "An Octoroon," one such photo is projected onto the set, Jacobs-Jenkins's way of approximating the novelty and the fear that once attended nineteenth-century sensation scenes.

I think of "Appropriate" as a companion to "An Octoroon," because, in isolation, the former can occasionally feel a little too calculated. "Appropriate," for all its deeply considered metaphorical work, doesn't always manage its internal logic, and you can sense Jacobs-Jenkins trying, sometimes laboriously, to move energy around the stage by ginning up events with unforgivable behavior. Rachael screams, "I'm not someone who raises fuckups—I raise winners!," a line that feels out of character. And the somewhat murky reasoning about property values must be whisked through, lest we notice that it doesn't make much sense. In some key scenes, though, I was knocked sideways by this quality of calculation—the feeling of a playwright evaluating a genre; the impression of an audience being deliberately provoked and then measured by the play. In the show's most shocking moment, a child appears wearing a Klan hood, and some in the audience erupted in laughter; others sat silent. After the uproar, I felt the house onstage settle back on its joists, its awful windows like eyes. Had it been watching us? And, if so, what had it seen? ♦

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

OVER THE LIMIT

"Ferrari" and "The Crime Is Mine."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Near the beginning of the new Michael Mann film, "Ferrari," we are treated to a fine visual gag. The year is 1957, and the setting is a tranquil country house, where Enzo Ferrari (Adam Driver), the founder of the company that bears his name, awakes beside his beloved. Having dressed, Enzo leaves the house as quietly as a cat, approaches a car, and *doesn't start it*. (Also, the car is not a Ferrari. This is like Alice Waters kicking off her day with an Egg McMuffin.) Instead, he releases the brake and pushes, jumping in and gunning the motor only halfway down the drive. Why so? Because his bedmate is his mistress, Lina Lardi (Shailene Woodley), and she's still asleep. Enzo needs to hasten back to his wife, Laura (Penélope Cruz), in the nearby city of Modena, thus allowing her to fire a pistol at him before he's even had a shave. In short, an average morning for the enterprising postwar Italian male.

Adam Driver plays Enzo Ferrari, the company's founder.

By design, the film catches Enzo at a moment of frailty and strain. His son Dino, whom he adored, died of Duchenne muscular dystrophy in 1956. Although Enzo and Laura pay daily visits to the cemetery where Dino is entombed, they go separately; so cracked is their marriage that they cannot grieve together. Enzo has another child, Piero (Giuseppe Festinese), the secret fruit of his relationship with Lina (of which Laura, though suspicious, is unaware), but postpones the boy's confirmation rather than publicly bless, or burden, him with the name Ferrari. In business, too, conditions are tough. "The production cars pay for the racing," Enzo says, but Ferrari built and sold fewer than a hundred such cars in the previous year; that number has to increase fourfold. Only with spectacular racing results, it is decided, can the marque reclaim its lustre. The ideal would be victory in the Mille Miglia, which Laura describes as "a thousand miles across bad roads with sheep and dogs." Bring it on.

"Ferrari" has been in the workshop for quite a while. The screenplay is by Troy Kennedy Martin, who died in 2009. It features the trusty components of a Mann movie: the smooth mechanics of professional labor, plus—or, more often, versus—the exhaust manifold of men's emotional lives. "When a thing works better, usually it is more beautiful to the eye," Enzo explains to Piero, retooling diagrams of an engine, and there are passages of "Ferrari" in which sheer velocity becomes a state of grace. The cinematographer, Erik Messerschmidt, likes to mount a camera down low, next to the left wheel arch of a race car, or else behind the cockpit, staring ahead. How swiftly we come to share the driver's hunger, wanting nothing on God's Earth except to eat up the track.

Here's the peculiar thing: Driver is not one of the drivers. In Mann's best films, the phrase "action hero" is revealed to be a tautology. Heroism, riven with risk, is available only to those who take action. Hence James Caan in "Thief" (1981), Daniel Day-Lewis—as fleet as a Ferrari, and never once running out of gas—in "The Last of the Mohicans" (1992), Al Pacino and Robert De Niro as the cop and the robber, respectively, in "Heat" (1995), and Tom Cruise as the assassin in "Collateral" (2004). The new film may begin with a brief, black-and-white remembrance of Enzo as a competitor, grinning with exultation at the wheel. (The glory days of early road racing happened to coincide with the reckless acceleration of silent cinema. A movie about that symbiosis could be fun.) The fact is, however, that Ferrari hung up his goggles in 1931, and for the rest of this story he is, in essence, a manager, arguing with his accountant, bullying journalists, and chiding his pack of daredevils if their will to win seems insufficiently brutal. Motorsport in the era of "Ferrari" is a matter not of do or die but, as Enzo understands, of do *and* die. Yet he is not doing the dying.

To an extent, Driver is an odd choice for the leading role. In no respect does he resemble the real Ferrari, who looked like a hybrid of Rodney Dangerfield and Salman Rushdie. For a closer approximation, I refer you to Adolfo Celi, who played a Ferrari-like boss in "Grand Prix" (1966), having limbered up as a Bond villain, complete with eye patch, in "Thunderball," the year before. But Driver does get at the undentable—one might say indispensable—hardness of heart in the character, and, for all his bonhomie at the barbershop or at a convivial lunch, and despite his doughty stride, there is an in-

ILLUSTRATION BY MARÍA JESÚS CONTRERAS

wardness in Enzo that the camera constantly probes. For a film about automobiles, "Ferrari" is surprisingly crammed with closeups, often in stillness and shadow. We can but imagine what Driver thought when he read the script of "Ferrari" and realized that, so alarmingly soon after "House of Gucci" (2021), he would once again be obliged not only to wrap his tongue around a *piccante* Italian accent but also to make spur-of-the-moment love with his co-star (first Lady Gaga, now Cruz) athwart a tabletop, negotiating highly complex lingerie along the way. As typecasting goes, it doesn't get much more niche than that.

The climax, in narrative terms, comes with the Mille Miglia. The spiffiest driver is Piero Taruffi—fifty years old, white-haired, immortally dashing, and played with evident relish by Patrick Dempsey, who has raced for real at Le Mans and Daytona, and who has confessed that he would happily renounce acting for motorsport. (Guess what: you can do both!) And the most touching sight in the whole movie, to my eyes, is that of the Ferrari aces sitting quietly in hotel rooms and writing letters to their loved ones, on the eve of the race, like soldiers heading off to war. A wise precaution. The contest commences before dawn, and we watch Enzo giving final instructions as he dispatches his men into the gloom, in their impossibly gorgeous machines. Red cars at night: spectators' delight. What follows, in daylight hours, shows Mann in his element. Vehicles roar through elegant cities—Ravenna, Bologna, Palma, Brescia—or jostle, hub to hub, through hairpin bends, in vast volcanic landscapes that evoke another world. Here, as throughout this beguiling film, there is a hint of elegy amid the thrills; we sense that the classic age of speed, aglow with glamour and enshrined in the driven soul of Enzo Ferrari, will and must be drawing to a close. One burst tire, on a straight road, and the dream can crash forever.

To be accused of an offense that you haven't committed is a terrible slur, and it can lead to a galling miscarriage of justice. To be innocent of an offense and yet to confess your guilt—not for pathological reasons but purely to get ahead in the world—takes a certain panache. Such is the scheme hatched in François Ozon's new film, "The Crime Is Mine," by a couple of young roommates, in Paris, in 1935. Pauline Mauléon (Rebecca Marder) is a lawyer who can't get a break. Madeleine Verdier (Nadia Tereszkiewicz) is an actress who can't get a part. Hoping for a change in fortune, Madeleine goes to see a producer, a portly creep who assaults her. She escapes, returns home, and learns that he has been shot dead. Hallelujah! Why not fess up, take the witness stand, hire Pauline to defend her, and reap the fame that ensues? What can go wrong?

The movie is one of those pointed and prickly farces, like "8 Women" (2002) and "Potiche" (2011), that Ozon tends to scatter among his more solemn projects, as if to keep his comic hand in. The dramatis personae are boldly drawn and, let us say, broadly performed. Fabrice Luchini, who was merely bewildered as a schoolmaster in Ozon's "In the House" (2013), is now completely clueless as Rabusset, the investigating judge in Madeleine's case. Isabelle Huppert, in a mad red wig, portrays a former empress of the silent screen, Odette Chaumette, who makes Norma Desmond look like a blushing maiden. Odette's first entrance is greeted by an ascending parp of brass on the soundtrack, and deservedly so. One actor hamming it up while everybody else plays it straight is an embarrassment; but a movie such as this, in which almost the entire cast contributes to the hamminess, is a platter of fine charcuterie.

Ozon, as ever, is not just having fun. He is also making mischief with the sexual politics of the plot. Pauline—the most interesting figure in the film, whose wistful love for Madeleine remains unspoken—rouses the courtroom with a very modern blast against the patriarchy, observing that women are "considered children for our rights but adults for our mistakes." The period detailing is far more than decorative. The costumes may be fabulous, as are the Art Deco interiors; the producer's villa is worth murdering for; and Madeleine is initiated into pastis, "a new drink from the south." Amid the charm and the silliness, however, it's a shock to hear of a wife being pursued for the size of her dowry, and to reflect that French women would not be able to vote until the elections of 1945.

At the end of "The Crime Is Mine," I found myself picturing a sequel, set only five years later, during the German Occupation of Paris, and wondering how the characters would fare. Pauline would stand up for the people's rights, and suffer greatly. Rabusset would round up Jews. Odette, armor-plated in self-belief, would soldier on. And the resourceful Madeleine? She, I suspect, might do very well indeed. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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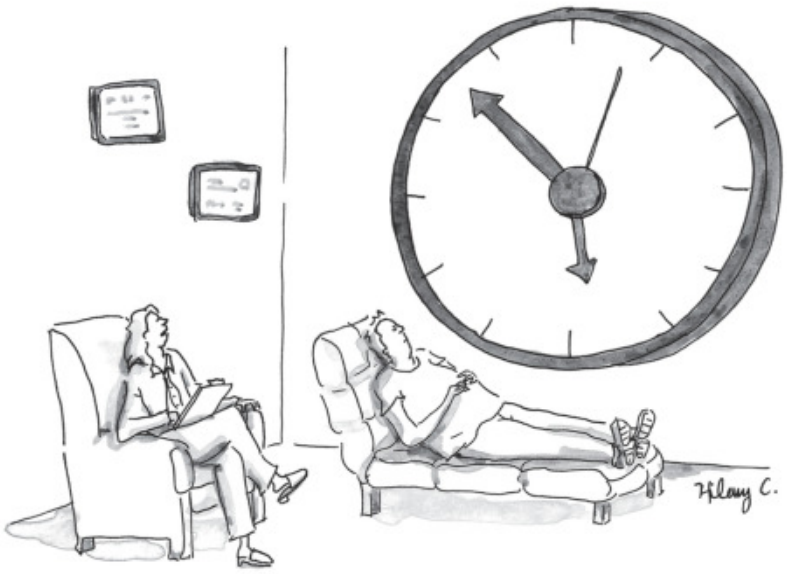
PLEASE RECYCLE THIS MAGAZINE

CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Hilary Fitzgerald Campbell, must be received by Sunday, January 7th. The finalists in the December 11th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 22nd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



" "

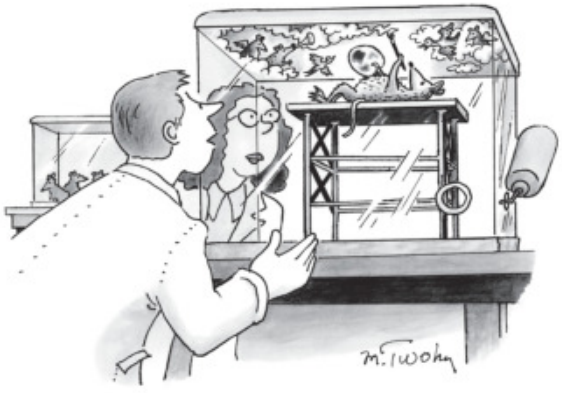
THE FINALISTS

"But, baby, it's cold inside."
Jeff Villhauer, North Liberty, Iowa

"The cat's on the warpath again. You're on your own!"
Eric Wagner, Bensalem, Pa.

"How much rum did you put in that eggnog?"
Susan Gale Wickes, Richmond, Ind.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Fine, it is derivative, but I say we still give him the cheese."
Ethan Ris, Reno, Nev.

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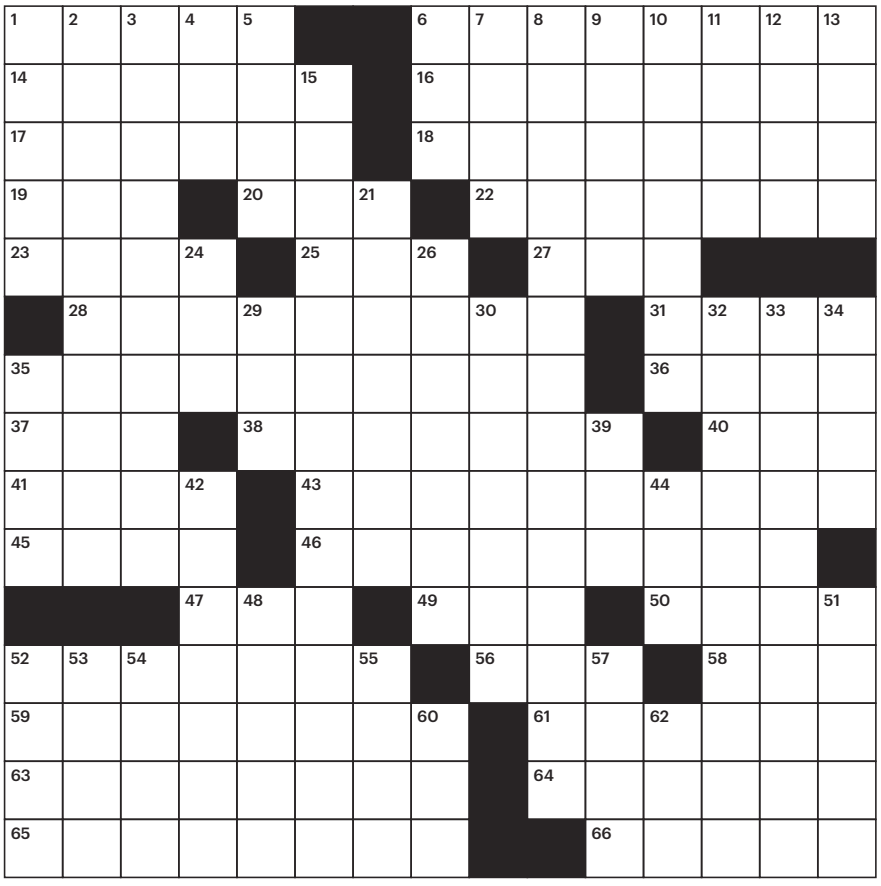
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY PAOLO PASCO



ACROSS

1 "You hate to see it"
6 Made a short visit
14 Releases, in a way
16 Starchy vegetarian dish
17 Globe Theatre address
18 Volume on a computer
19 Something handled in the garden
20 Way off
22 Word in many French company names
23 Character who sings "Roll in the Hay" in the musical "Young Frankenstein"
25 Cosmetics brand owned by Estée Lauder
27 Bleu ___ Causses (cheese similar to Roquefort)
28 It might be likened to a sieve
31 Catherine who returned to "Doctor Who" in 2023
35 Tools for julienning
36 Thump
37 Back
38 Club members who may sift through scores of applicants?
40 Org. with a popular style manual
41 Enrique ___ Nieto (predecessor of Andrés Manuel López Obrador)
43 Money for some seniors
45 Mining dross
46 Fixture that relies on star power
47 Threads, e.g.
49 Block letters?
50 "___ Rush" (2023 documentary about sorority recruitment at a Southern school)
52 Treatments often received with closed eyes
56 "Division by Zero" author Chiang
58 Shade akin to khaki
59 Absolute tyranny
61 Permanently fix
63 Member of the Aesir or the Vanir
64 Aggravation
65 Makeup exams?
66 "If you ask me . . ."

DOWN

1 Rolls on the table
2 Ring made with bulbs
3 Owner of a magic pasta pot, in kid lit
4 Basketball center
5 The "D" in "CODA"
6 Dog's "dog"
7 Encouragements for *cante jondo* singers
8 "We all make mistakes," cutesily
9 Puerto Rican city named for the descendant of an explorer
10 Ones with big heads
11 Aquiline : eagle :: columbine : ___
12 "Yeah, that definitely happened . . ."
13 River that once had a tributary called the Khufu Branch
15 Dishonorable mentions?
21 Give a hard butt
24 Put on top
26 Onetime Senate leaders
29 Working ___
30 Turn into a movie one more time, maybe
32 Where sheepskins come from
33 Growing concern in the seventeenth century?
34 [Gasp]
35 Some fantasy-novel appendices
39 Dream gig for a U.C.B. alum, perhaps
42 Abutting
44 Part of a cereal-box top
48 "___, What Did You Do to Me?" (Cole Porter song from "Fifty Million Frenchmen")
51 Restless
52 Discovery
53 Cal's brother, in "East of Eden"
54 Celebrity chef Cat
55 Opening for a 44-Down
57 South Asian umbrella term
60 Paper cutters, for short?
62 Material for some masks

Solution to the previous puzzle:

■	P	O	S	T	D	O	C	■	P	A	S	T	S	■
O	R	A	T	O	R	I	O	■	E	L	A	I	N	E
N	O	T	A	T	A	L	L	■	L	I	L	K	I	M
E	M	B	L	E	M	■	S	U	E	■	V	I	D	I
L	O	R	E	S	■	H	O	N	■	L	A	B	E	L
A	T	A	D	■	C	A	N	E	S	U	G	A	R	■
P	E	N	■	D	O	G	W	A	L	K	E	R	■	■
■	■	■	T	O	U	G	H	R	O	A	D	■	■	■
■	■	H	E	L	P	L	I	N	E	S	■	S	I	C
■	C	A	M	P	S	I	T	E	S	■	B	A	N	E
M	O	R	P	H	■	N	E	D	■	G	O	H	A	M
O	P	I	E	■	U	G	H	■	M	U	G	A	B	E
T	O	S	S	I	T	■	E	V	I	L	G	R	I	N
H	U	S	T	L	E	■	A	I	R	P	L	A	N	T
■	T	A	S	K	S	■	D	A	Y	S	E	N	D	■

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**

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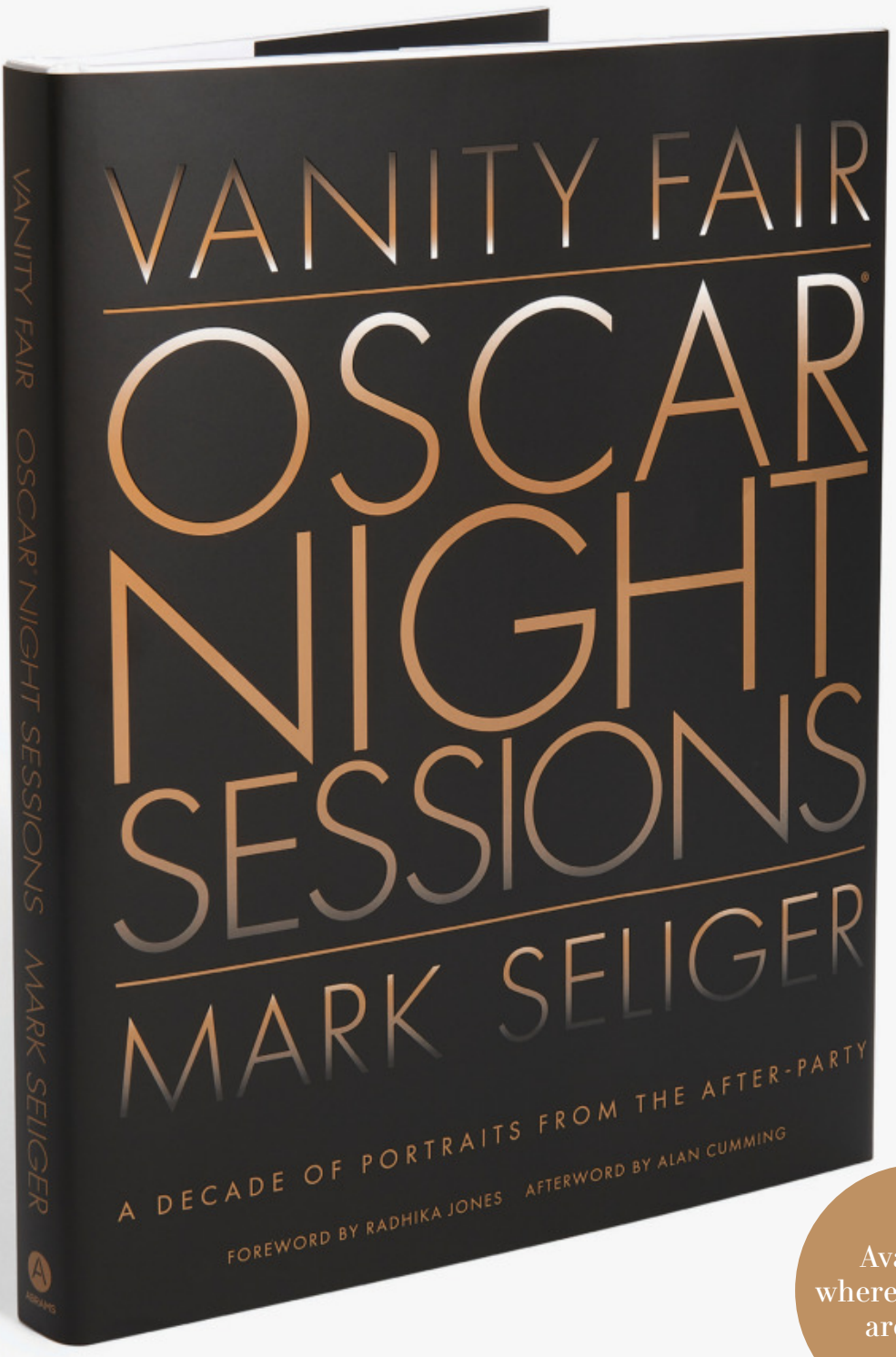

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